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Allegiances

~COPYRIGHT STATEMENT REGARDING MY WARRIORS FICS~
I am putting this here simply because it has become quite an issue lately. Please DO NOT use my original characters/clans/concepts in any of your Warriors fics. (This does not include warriors cats with the same names. I understand coincidences if we happened to pick the same names for our characters.) I work hard on my novels, and it is upsetting to witness a circumstance where the author feels they need to "borrow" ideas/characters from me because they're not creative enough. Simply stated, the Warriors world is big and complex enough for an author to be able to create his or her own characters/clans/plot. Thank you for your understanding.

~STATEMENT REGARDING GRAMMATICAL ERRORS AND COMMENTS~

Please REFRAIN from continually correcting typos and grammatical errors. I am a grammar nazi myself, and I understand some of you are too, but I have several published works and do not have time to correct EVERY error. Unless the error severely limits your understanding of the story, I will not be taking immediate action to fix these typos. Please REFRAIN from telling me "cats can't cry" and "cats can't blush" etc. These novels are a work of FICTION. I know cats can't cry and perform human-like characteristics; however, this is a work of fiction and is written in a way to convey emotion. I am sick and tired of getting comments like these because they detract from my work and make it seem like you care more about correcting typos/ (sorry) being a pompous know-it-all than reading and enjoying a work. Don't be surprised if I get sassy/sarcastic with you in the comments. I ask you refrain from making such comments on my work.

CATS:

Tigerstripe: brown tabby tom with green eyes

Jetfur: jet black she-cat with green eyes

Bone: white tom with green eyes

Bloodfur: dark orange tabby she-cat

Snakepelt: brown tabby she-cat with ripped ear

Mossytail: black and white she-cat

Graystar: old gray tom

Orangeflower: old ginger she-cat

Blackpelt: jet black she-cat

Daisyflower: tortoiseshell she-cat

Krait: Siamese she-cat

Riley: white tom with splashes of brown and black and green eyes

Harly: white, black, and brown she-cat with a blue and green eye

Flamepaw: ginger she-cat with green eyes

Barkpaw: brown tabby tom with green eyes

Dusty: gray tom

Mothwing: calico she-cat

Korosu: Javanese she-cat with red eyes

Swampstar: mucky-colored tom with green eyes

Hyacinth: Siamese she-cat

Hazelstar: brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

Chesnuttail: dusty brown tom with green eyes

Screechshade: dark brown she-cat

OTHER ANIMALS:

Rain: red fox

Lupin: Timber wolf

Breeze: white wolf

Rose: Newfoundland puppy

Holly: Newfoundland puppy

Seven: mutt

Chapter 1

Tigerstripe sulkingly meandered through the forest with his other clanmates. Or were they even clanmates anymore? He continued trudging through the woods, frustration spiking his pelt. It just wasn't fair.

His mother, Moonstar, had created the evil clan of MoonClan, and since birth, he had been taught that their clan would prevail. All his life Tigerstripe had trained to his highest potential, undergoing an incredible amount of physical and emotional pain to achieve his spot as a warrior of MoonClan.

But the battle had been lost, and Moonstar was now dead. The clan was now being led back to their camp in poor spirits. The deputy, or new leader, Tigerstripe presumed, Bone, led the way. Bone, a muscular white tom, was Tigerstripe's former mentor and a fierce fighter. Perhaps he'd lead MoonClan back to victory.

Tigerstripe glanced around at the other cats, noticing they had the same somber expressions as him. Some looked anxious and nervous as they came up the hill to their camp. Tigerstripe hurried up the hill, relieved to be back at his old camp.

Within moments, cats were chatting amongst themselves about the situation, though their cries were broken off by Bone. Tigerstripe was relieved, knowing Bone would be able to end their concerns. Surely he'd lead them back to being a strong clan.

"Cats of MoonClan!" Bone yowled from the rock where Moonstar originally stood.

The cats of MoonClan fell quiet, listening to the white tom.

"Now that Moonstar is dead, it would be custom for me to become leader of MoonClan," he explained, his piercing green eyes fixated on the crowd. "But this cannot be. I will not be the new leader of MoonClan nor will any other cat."

Tigerstripe froze.

"MoonClan is finished," Bone announced at last. "Disperse and leave. Some of you may be rogues or perhaps you'll join a clan, but as of now, this clan is over."

Bone descended down the rock to join his mate, Bloodfur, and then soon had left the camp himself. As cats chattered angrily

among themselves, Tigerstripe was shocked and heartbroken. How had Bone so easily let the clan fall apart?

Sighing, Tigerstripe was unsure of what to do. He himself could surely not join a clan. He had no family to go with. After all, his sister had died during battle, and his other siblings were traitors, fighting against MoonClan.

Tigerstripe glanced longily over at Screechshade, the she-cat he had formerly had a crush on, though he knew even then that a life with her would be hopeless.

Perhaps I'll just be a rogue, he decided, glancing around as the clan became emptier and emptier. If he didn't make a move, he'd be the only one left.

Tigerstripe sighed, watching cats go, when something caught his eye. Near the edge of the camp stood Jetfur, a small black she-cat who'd been one of their weakest warriors. Unsure why he was suddenly interested in her business, he called to her.

"Jetfur!" he shouted.

The black she-cat's ears twitched, but she ignored him, beginning to pad out of the camp and into the woods.

"Wait, Jetfur!" Tigerstripe called, rushing after her on his fast feet. He quickly caught up to the she-cat, despite her rapid pace.

"Where are you going?" he wondered. "Are you going to a clan? Are you going to be a rogue?"

The she-cat refused to make eye contact with him. In a shaky voice, she spoke, "I don't know…Leave me alone," she murmured, quickening her pace.

Tigerstripe, ignoring her clear warning to leave her alone, continued to trot by her side.

"Well, I think I'm going to be a rogue," he decided. "What clan will you join?"

"I don't want to join a clan," she announced, continuing to walk. In a quieter voice she whispered, "I won't be making that mistake again." She quickened her pace, though Tigerstripe quickly caught up to her.

"Making a mistake!" he exclaimed, laughing. "Why, MoonClan was the best thing that ever happened to you, I assure you. Listen, Jetfur. You're now able to perform extreme battle moves that will protect you and assist you. Your quick running skills and hunting skills will help you. How could that be a

mistake?" He noticed Jetfur quickening her pace. "Hey, where are you going?"

"To get away from you," she murmured.

"Get away from me?" Tigerstripe asked. "How come?"

"You talk too much," she admitted.

"I don't talk too much!" he argued.

Jetfur paused and turned to face him, twitching her whiskers in amusement.

"Hey, quit laughing at me!"

There was a certain spark in her eyes that had appeared. "I-I can't," she admitted, giggling.

Tigerstripe laughed too. "Maybe I am a bit of a blabbermouth."

Jetfur's gleaming eyes returned to their dull gaze. "Well, I must be off…"

Tigerstripe looked down. "Oh, yeah," he admitted. He turned back towards the camp, glancing over his shoulder one last time. "Good-bye," he called, sighing as he disembarked. He guessed he really was alone now.

Less than a minute later, Jetfur's shout came from behind him.

"Wait!" she called.

Tigerstripe looked back. "Yes?" he wondered.

Jetfur paused and took in a deep breath. "I want to come with you," she admitted.

"You do?" Tigerstripe wondered, padding up to her to meet her. "Life as a rogue is tough," he explained. "You must travel to many places and fend for yourself. My father was a rogue, you know."

"I-I think I'll be fine," Jetfur agreed. "As long as I'm not alone…"

"Okay," he agreed, smiling. "Follow me!" he called, climbing up a tree. Without even thinking, he began leaping from branch to branch, dropping back down near a rushing river.

Turning around, he noticed Jetfur had not followed him. Upon glancing up, he noticed the tiny black cat clinging to the bark of a large tree. She looked at him, terrified.

"Here, let me help!" he called, digging his claws into the bark as he scurried back up the tree to assist Jetfur.

As Jetfur slowly moved forward to reach the other branch,

she slipped and yowled. Tigerstripe quickly helped her onto the branch, saying calmly, “I’m right here.”

Jetfur nodded, though fear still shined in her eyes.

Slowly, Tigerstripe led Jetfur from branch to branch at a cautious pace, taking his time to make sure she was able to get across each branch carefully. As he did so, he began to worry that maybe allowing Jetfur to join him wasn’t the best idea. Still, he hated the idea of being alone…

Finally, Tigerstripe arrived at the last dark branch. “Now, we need to jump,” he explained, gesturing his tail towards the spot on the forest floor below.

Jetfur nodded, her claws still unsheathed as if she expected to continue clinging to tree branches and bark.

Tigerstripe glanced down at the forest floor and leapt, landing on all fours. Grinning to himself, he glanced back up at Jetfur.

“Now, you do the same,” he instructed.

Jetfur, shaking in nervousness, nodded. Her eyes were wide with fear, and he watched as she took a deep breath, then leapt, landing successfully next to him.

“Good job!” Tigerstripe exclaimed, feeling as if he were congratulating a young apprentice on catching his or her first kill.

Jetfur looked at the sky, causing Tigerstripe to do the same. He too had noticed that the sky had taken on an orange color, slowly turning into darker and darker indigo.

“It’s getting dark,” he admitted. “We better find a place to sleep.”

Jetfur nodded.

Trudging through the unknown forest, Tigerstripe glanced around, seeking some shelter as it began to get darker and darker outside. Jetfur followed behind, also glancing around for some bit of shelter they could find.

As Tigerstripe came up a grassy hill, he noticed a wide and hollow log sitting next to a large pine tree.

“Aha!” he shouted, nudging Jetfur. He pointed his tail to the log, and Jetfur nodded in agreement, as if she already knew what he was implying.

Tigerstripe and Jetfur approached the log. Tigerstripe glanced down, inspecting the log. He was relieved, though somewhat disappointed, to find it held no animal inside. If only a

family of squirrels had been living in there, he'd have had a nice snack. His stomach was grumbling, though exhaustion from a long day was his first priority in attending to.

"In here," Tigerstripe spoke, crawling into the hollow log.

Jetfur cautiously placed one paw in then followed, curling up beside Tigerstripe. Tigerstripe slowly closed his eyes, allowing exhaustion from a long day to take hold of him. Before he knew it, he had drifted off into a deep sleep.

Chapter 2

Tigerstripe awoke the next morning to find sunlight streaming in through a crack in the hollow log. He yawned and glanced around, at first expecting to find himself in his nest in the MoonClan camp. Upon seeing Jetfur, however, the reality came back to him.

MoonClan was gone, and he and Jetfur had set out as rogues.

Tigerstripe was still in shock over the ending of his clan, but he supposed he should've seen it coming. Bone had always been a bit more cowardly than he made himself to be. How had he not known until the announcement?

Turning to face Jetfur, he watched the black she-cat's chest rise and fall with each breath. She slept peacefully, so much so that Tigerstripe felt somewhat guilty about waking her.

He lightly tapped her with his tail.

"Hey, wake up, sleepy-head," he called.

Jetfur's eyes slowly flittered open, revealing her emerald eyes. She yawned and stretched, padding outside of the log with Tigerstripe by her side. Tigerstripe followed her and glanced around, admiring the sunny-day. It was leaf-bare, which meant sunny days were rare. Fortunately, it had not been as bad this year, and only small clumps of snow stuck to the forest floor.

"Sleep well?" Tigerstripe wondered.

"Oh, yes," Jetfur agreed, clearly more focused on the scenery of the forest than Tigerstripe. He glanced at her curiously. She'd always been a mysterious cat in MoonClan, one of the weakest too. Had he made the right choice in allowing her to come?

"How did you sleep?" Jetfur wondered.

"Good," Tigerstripe replied. "But it would've been nice to curl up on

a nice nest of moss." This response prompted a twitching of whiskers in Jetfur as she laughed.

Tigerstripe laughed too, glad someone actually appreciated his jovial attitude.

Their laugher was interrupted by the loud sound of Tigerstripe's stomach growling. Jetfur turned to him in surprise.

"Was that you?" she wondered.

"Guess I'm a bit hungry," Tigerstripe admitted.

"I thought a lion had found us," Jetfur teased, poking him lightly.

"Hey!" Tigerstripe called, though he didn't mind. He was known for having a large appetite.

"I say we go hunting for some breakfast," Tigerstripe suggested.

Jetfur nodded, heading off with Tigerstripe through a clump of trees. Tigerstripe didn't expect to turn back to their base camp, so he continued on through the wintery woods, his nose held in the air as he sniffed for the scent of prey. Jetfur did the same.

Tigerstripe wasn't exactly sure where they were heading. He had no plan on where they'd go. He only followed his nose, trying to catch the whiff of some prey.

Taking a step forward, he froze, a particular scent catching his nose. Freezing, Jetfur stopped being him, confused.

"Did you see," she began, only to be shushed by Tigerstripe.

He remained perfectly still, his eyes focused on a nearby bush. He had no doubts that a piece of prey was lurking in the bushes. A moment later, a small rabbit hopped out of the bushes, completely ignorant of the fact Tigerstripe and Jetfur were standing near it.

Before it could find out, Tigerstripe crept down and leapt, killing the rabbit as it glanced up at him, its eyes wide with fear as Tigerstripe brought down his large, sharpened claws, killing the

creature instantly.

Tigerstripe came up with the rabbit in his jaws, displaying it proudly as he padded over to Jetfur.
"Good catch," Jetfur said, her eyes glued to the rabbit. No doubt she was starving too.

"Thanks," Tigerstripe replied, dropping the rabbit at her feet. "We can share. There's enough for both of us."

Jetfur nodded, sitting down across from Tigerstripe. Rabbits had been a normal meal in MoonClan, as their camp was situated in the foothills. He took a bite, humming in delight as he tasted the salty flavor of rabbit meat.

Rabbits in MoonClan had been a bit more plump, but Tigerstripe had not expected much, considering it was the middle of leaf-bare. He supposed he was lucky even to find a piece of prey so quickly.

"Good rabbit?" Tigerstripe asked Jetfur, who had munched away at her half.

Jetfur nodded vigorously, licking her lips.

Tigerstripe glanced down at the rest of the rabbit, then pushed it to Jetfur.

"Here, you finish it," Tigerstripe insisted.

Jetfur's eyes widened, as if she thought Tigerstripe were testing her.

"But you caught it," she argued. "We shouldn't even be sharing it."

"Hey, we're not in MoonClan anymore," Tigerstripe reminded her. "You have the rest."

"Okay," Jetfur sighed, hesitating as he bit into the rest of the rabbit. Tigerstripe guessed she needed the extra meat. She was quite thin for a MoonClan cat, probably because she had been of lower status in the clan, which meant her meals were probably smaller than Tigerstripe's. Plus, Tigerstripe was large and muscular for his size. He wouldn't starve with half a rabbit in his stomach.

Jetfur finished the rabbit and licked her white teeth in satisfaction.

"Feel better?" Tigerstripe asked.

Jetfur nodded. "Moonstar only let me eat mice and prey cats didn't want," she admitted.

Tigerstripe frowned, thinking this was somewhat cruel. Hadn't his mother wanted strong warriors? Surely deprivation of food would contradict that.

"Well, you're welcome to eat as much as you like. We're rogues now, which means no more clan rules," Tigerstripe decided.

Jetfur grinned, obviously liking this new philosophy.

Tigerstripe stood up and stretched, ready to continue moving.

"Tigerstripe " Jetfur called as she stood up beside him.

He turned, facing her.

"Yes?"

"Where exactly are we heading?" she asked. "I-I don't meant to say you're a bad leader or you have no sense of direction. Of course, maybe I'm just misinterpreting this whole rogue thing. Perhaps we are just meant to wander wherever. Forget I said anything." She looked down, clearly embarrassed.

"Hm," Tigerstripe thought. "Well, I mean, rogues sometimes do stay in the same place from time to time. I wasn't exactly sure where we'd go."

"Oh," Jetfur replied, still refusing to make eye contact with him. He guessed she was one who wanted a sense of where she was going.

Suddenly, an idea hit Tigerstripe.

"Hey, I got an idea!" he exclaimed.

Jetfur glanced up. "You do?"

"I was born in a forest farther from here," he began. "When MoonClan was just beginning, Moonstar went off, and after giving birth to me and my siblings, she decided to drive the other clans from the forest. So the other clans, SnowClan and FoxClan, were driven away while MoonClan followed them and established their new camp in the same forest as their enemies. As far as I know, that old forest is still empty. I bet there are even still dens up!"

"It sounds brilliant!" Jetfur exclaimed. "Do you know how to get there?"

"We might get a little lost, but I think I have an idea," Tigerstripe replied. "So, to my birthplace?"
"To your birthplace!" Jetfur decided.

Glad to have an established plan, Tigerstripe began padding through the woods, trying to recall all that he could from his journey as a kit to the new forest. He was sure this journey would take a moon at last, and that was if he had a clear sense of direction. He assumed that in reality, it would be several moons, maybe even green-leaf, before they arrived.

Still, as Tigerstripe glanced over at Jetfur, he realized he'd never seen the jet black she-cat so happy before. She trotted along, her eyes gleaming. He was glad to have pleased her.

They headed along through the woods, Tigerstripe leading the way as he recalled familiar scents. Jetfur followed behind, chatting eagerly with him about all they would see and do when they arrived at his home.

"Remember, it's still a long way off," Tigerstripe reminded her, not wanting to get her hopes raised too high. For all he knew, the forest could've been now preoccupied by other clans or perhaps destroyed by the two-legs. He kept these thoughts quiet though, not wanting to bother Jetfur with his insecurities about the clan.

"I know," Jetfur purred. "I'm just happy to be free from MoonClan!"

Tigerstripe did not reply. He had been satisfied with MoonClan, but so far, hearing of Jetfur's experience, he supposed she perhaps did

not have as pleasant as of an experience as he had. He had practically been royalty, being descended from the leader and all.

Continuing along their way, they were fortunate enough to catch a water vole scattering across a frozen river. Jetfur had successfully caught it, and together, they shared the vole, their stomachs now filled.

Unfortunately, with the season of leaf-bare, sunlight was limited, leaving them with only so many hours to travel during the day. Tired and exhausted, Tigerstripe frantically searched for shelter as the sky began to turn indigo.

Jetfur searched around and finally pointed out a large rock that stretched out, providing some shelter. Though Tigerstripe guessed he could find something better, he was so tired from walking that he agreed and followed her towards the large granite rock.

Jetfur curled up under it first, Tigerstripe following. With limited room, they were squished pretty tightly together, which was somewhat uncomfortable for Tigerstripe. He preferred his own personal space.

Fortunately, Jetfur was small, and she didn't take too much room. In addition, a wind had picked up, and Tigerstripe was semi-thankful for the warmth of another cat to keep him warm. Yawning, he closed his eyes and rested his head alongside Jetfur's, falling asleep.

Chapter 3

Tigerstripe opened his eyes slowly as light blinded him. As his vision came into view, he leapt up in surprise as he found himself resting beside Jetfur. He hadn't realized how'd close they'd squeezed together during the night, and he hadn't expected to find himself situated so close to her. Yowling in surprise, he leapt up, also forgetting they had sheltered underneath a rock for the night. In surprise, he hit his head against the rock and came back down, growling to himself as his head stung.

Jetfur's eyes immediately opened in surprise, and she slowly stood up, noticing Tigerstripe. Upon seeing him rub his head with his tail, her whiskers twitched in amusement.

"What happened to you?" she wondered.

"Hit my head," Tigerstripe muttered, embarrassed to have forgotten that a rock was hanging over his head.

Jetfur giggled some more. "Was that what you were yowling about?"

"Something like that," Tigerstripe grumbled, stepping out from underneath the rock carefully. This prompted more laughter from Jetfur, which caused Tigerstripe to grumble even more. His day hadn't gotten off to the best start.

"Oh, come on, I'm just messing around," Jetfur assured him while Tigerstripe sat down, sulking.

"My head hurts," he muttered.

"I thought you were a big MoonClan cat," she teased. "And you're complaining about a little bump."

Unfortunately, Jetfur was aware of Tigerstripe's weaknesses, his pride being one of them.

"I am a MoonClan cat!" he growled, standing up.

"Well, why don't you prove those MoonClan skills by finding us something to eat," Jetfur suggested. "I'm starving."

"Fine," he agreed. Together, he and Jetfur padded through the woods, Tigerstripe's nose still lifted high in the air as he tried to trace any scent of his old home. It had been so long ago, he wondered if he could even find it. Much of his memories were filled with the recent MoonClan camp and the journey he'd made as a

young kit.

While his nose did not pick up the scent of his old home, he did catch the scent of a robin. Licking his lips and realizing how hungry he was too, he quietly poked Jetfur and pointed to the robin sitting on a nearby tree branch.

Jetfur nodded and urged Tigerstripe to make the kill.

Grinning, Tigerstripe knew it was now time to show off his MoonClan skills. Digging his sharp nails into the tree bark, he climbed up the tree slowly, still keeping distance from the red-breasted bird in order not to alarm it.

Jetfur watched below, which added a bit of pressure on Tigerstripe. He knew that if he missed this catch, she'd surely laugh at him.

Since when do I care if she laughs at me? he wondered. After all, she had been a very low-ranked member in MoonClan. He had been one of the best warriors of the clan.

Coming up equal to the bird now, Tigerstripe leapt into the air, just as the bird caught sight of him. As it spread its wings to take flight, Tigerstripe closed his large brown paws around the bird and struck it, blood coating his claws as he killed it.

Desperately trying to regain balance as he shook on the tree branch, he held on tightly to the bird with one claw and the bark of the branch in the other.

"Careful!" Jetfur cried from below.

That's odd, he thought. *I would've thought she'd laugh at me.*

Now balanced once more, Tigerstripe placed the robin in his jaws and slowly inched his way back down the tree, careful not to miss a step. His feet finally touched the forest floor, and he padded to Jetfur happily with his piece of prey.

Jetfur grinned as he set the robin down.

"Good catch," she told him.

"I wasn't one of the best hunters in the clan for nothing," he admitted, puffing out his chest as he boasted about his accomplishments.

"Yeah..." Jetfur replied, glancing down at the bird. She took a small bite, and Tigerstripe paused, wondering what he had said. Perhaps discussing his accomplishments in MoonClan wasn't the best idea. After all, it was Jetfur who wanted to forget about the old days in the bloodthirsty clan.

Falling quiet as well, Tigerstripe took a bite of the robin, his

stomach slowly filling. Although it did not fill him completely, it satisfied him, and he left the rest of his share for Jetfur to eat. If she were going to embark on a long journey with him, it was important for her to keep up her strength.

"Are you getting enough to eat?" Jetfur asked as Tigerstripe finished burying the bones of the deceased robin. They had left that part of the forest now and were continuing their expedition.

Tigerstripe shrugged. "Not as much as I'd like, but you need to keep up your strength."

"If you caught the prey, you should eat it," Jetfur decided.

"What will you eat?" Tigerstripe wondered.

The black she-cat shrugged. "Whatever I catch. How about that? We both catch for ourselves."

"That doesn't seem fair," Tigerstripe admitted.

"What? Do you think I'm not able to catch anything?" Jetfur asked, her green eyes stinging with annoyance.

"What? No!" Tigerstripe argued. "I just thought..."

"Then it's settled. We'll both hunt together, but we're responsible for catching our own prey," Jetfur explained.

"All right," Tigerstripe sighed, still not satisfied with the decision. He didn't want Jetfur to starve, but his health was important as well.

The woods were somewhat familiar to Tigerstripe now, and he thought back to himself as a young kit traveling through these woods with the rest of his clan. He had picked up some of the scent and was working the best he could to follow it now.

Turning a corner, he and Jetfur approached into an even more dense part of the forest. The sunlight was nearly washed out by the multitude of trees surrounding them, trapping them in a dark environment.

As Tigerstripe sniffed the air for the familiar scent again, he picked up an odd, yet familiar scent. He paused for a moment, Jetfur stopping behind him in confusion. Suddenly, the scent was ever so clear. He'd smelled it several times in MoonClan.

"Fox!" he gasped, recognizing the scent.

Without thinking, Tigerstripe leapt up the nearest tree, completely abandoning Jetfur. He dug his claws into the bark and scurried up the tree like a young kit, trying to get as far away from the fox as possible. If there was one animal he hated, it was a fox. The ginger animal had haunted him ever since he was a kit.

Moonstar had often teased him about it and purposely assigned him onto patrols to drive foxes from the territory.

What a great mother, Tigerstripe thought.

Though he had been able to drive the fox away with other clan members, he still wasn't completely over his fear, and he stopped at a high tree branch, panting heavily.

The fox leapt out of some nearby bushes and bared its sharp white teeth at Jetfur. The black she-cat froze, then crouched and hissed menancingly at the fox. Tigerstripe guessed she thought it would scare it off, but the fox remained, still snarling at Jetfur.

"What am I doing?" Tigerstripe whispered, leaping back down the tree. The fox was rapidly creeping up on Jetfur now, and like a fool, Tigerstripe had left her down below with no help.

As his feet touched the ground beside Jetfur, the she-cat turned to him angrily.

"Um, I wasn't scared," he lied. He turned to the fox now and growled at it, unsheathing his sharp claws.

Jetfur backed up, her claws unsheathed as well as the fox approached. As it came closer, she hid behind Tigerstripe. Apparently she was more frightened of the fox than Tigerstripe had been.

The fox lunged just as Tigerstripe shouted, "Move to the side!"

Tigerstripe and Jetfur quickly moved from each other, and the fox landed on the ground, disappointed. Turning its gaze on Tigerstripe, it now chose him as a target.

It leapt towards Tigerstripe once more, though the tom quickly turned and climbed back up the tree. This action, however, was not one of cowardice, but one of strategy. The fox was completely ignoring Jetfur now and snarling at Tigerstripe as he stopped at a branch.

The fox stood on its hind legs and clawed at the bark of the tree, growling. Catching Jetfur's eyes, Tigerstripe leapt down and landed on top of the fox, digging his claws into the fox's back.

Jetfur, meanwhile, backed up some more and charged, plowing into the fox. Yowling in pain, the fox fell to the side as Tigerstripe leapt off. Clearly defeated, the fox limped off into the bushes, whining.

"Yeah! Take that!" Tigerstripe yowled, his heart racing as adrenaline rushed through him. Jetfur grinned too, proud of their

ability to drive off the fox together.

"Nice work!" Tigerstripe told Jetfur, not expecting her to have thought through the plan so well.

Jetfur smiled and glanced down at her paws. "It was nothing. Should we be off now? I don't want to run into anymore."

"Sure, but I think we could take them," Tigerstripe admitted, beginning to walk again. As he padded alongside the she-cat, he was suddenly extremely grateful she'd come along with him. They worked well together as a team, he discovered.

Chapter 4

Tigerstripe awoke in the early morning, letting out a large yawn as his eyes adjusted to the morning light. He and Jetfur had spent the night curled up in a hollow tree, which made for good shelter, but it was a bit squished.

Carefully moving over Jetfur so as to not wake her, Tigerstripe exited the hollow tree and stretched his sore limbs, which were tired from walking. He and Jetfur had been traveling nearly seven sunrises now, and to be honest, he was enjoying every bit of it. He wondered why he'd ever desired to set off alone.

They'd run into no other enemies since the fox, but Tigerstipe still felt confident that as a team, they could hold off any animal, even a vicious lion. He'd really grown toward Jetfur, wondering why he had never really noticed her before in MoonClan. Sure, she wasn't the best warrior in his clan, but he realized she did possess some neat skills, and therefore, she shouldn't be ignored.

Jetfur's meal plan had also tended to work out all right. They still kept together while hunting though, afraid they'd get lost and separated. Still, as a pair they'd hunt until both of them had an equal amount of prey to eat. Tigerstripe was finally beginning to feel satisfied after a meal again.

Tigerstripe's stomach growled now, and he waited impatiently for Jetfur to wake up. Though his hunger made him desire to just sneak a peek around the corner to see if a rabbit was waiting there, he knew it wasn't right to leave Jetfur alone. After all, he was the only one who knew where he was going.

As far as Tigerstripe knew, he was on the right path to his home. The scent was becoming more familiar to him, as well as the path, and his mind flashed with memories of his youth, making the same journey, but in the opposite direction.

"Tigerstripe?" Jetfur called quietly from the hollow tree. Tigerstripe was thrilled to know she was finally up and awake.

"I'm out here!" he called.

After a few moments, Jetfur stepped out into the sunlight, her black pelt contrasting greatly with the morning sun. As Tigerstripe glanced up at the sky, he could already notice some darker clouds in the distance. He sighed, hoping it wouldn't affect their travel.

"Ready to hunt?" Jetfur asked as she too stretched out her tired limbs.

Tigerstripe nodded, and the two set off farther into the forest, glancing around for any sign of prey life. Despite it being the middle of leaf-bare, he and Jetfur were still able to find enough prey to sustain themselves, as they were only feeding themselves, not an entire clan.

"See anything?" Tigerstripe asked as they walked quietly through the silent forest.

Jetfur shook her head, but her eyes gazed forward, glancing around at the trees and bushes for any sign of movement. Tigerstripe sniffed the air but found no scent whatsoever except the scent of pine needles. His stomach growled louder, and he groaned.

"Your hunger is going to drive away the prey," Jetfur whispered, her eyes still locked on the forest ahead of her.

"It's not my fault," Tigerstripe complained.

Suddenly, Jetfur froze. Tigerstripe stopped abruptly, nearly knocking into the small she-cat.

"What is it?" he asked, only to be shushed by Jetfur. In an instant, she was gone, leaping toward a bush. Tigerstripe paused, watching as she disappeared into the leaves of the bush. There was some rustling from inside the bush, and leaves were thrown into the air. A moment later, Jetfur emerged with a rabbit in her jaws, her eyes gleaming with happiness.

"Good catch!" Tigerstripe exclaimed, amazed.

"Thanks, but you should be quiet. You've still got to get your breakfast," she reminded him. Tigerstripe nodded and continued on, trying to ignore the sweet scent of the dead rabbit. He continued on through the forest, keeping his eyes peeled for any sign of prey.

As they came toward a nearby stream, Tigerstripe looked hopefully for any animals that might be nearby. Before he could even catch a glimpse, he caught the scent of an animal and licked his lips happily. Crouching down and slowly approaching the stream, he noticed a young water vole sitting near the side of the

stream.

Ah, yes. Breakfast, Tigerstripe thought to himself. He sprung into the air, his claws unsheathed, and struck the water vole. It squeaked in surprised and died in Tigerstripe's grasp moments later. He picked up his prey and joined Jetfur by a nearby tree, where she was already sitting and devouring her rabbit.

"Couldn't even wait for me?" Tigerstripe asked, sitting down and taking a bite from his vole.

"What? I knew you'd get that piece of prey. There was no need to wait," Jetfur explained, taking another bite of her rabbit.

Tigerstripe smiled and gobbled up his breakfast, soon becoming satisfied. His stomach was no longer growling loudly with each movement he made, and he felt full of energy after standing up.

"Ready to go?" Jetfur asked, standing up beside him.

The striped tom nodded, glancing around as he determined which way to go. "This way," he decided, leading her farther north. Jetfur followed behind, trotting next to him happily.

He enjoyed the fact that the she-cat had placed so much faith in him. He hoped he was going the right way, and he was trying as hard as he could to make sure he was taking the most accurate path. Still, he was glad she didn't complain to him.

Jetfur had actually proved to be a very hard worker. Her hunting skills were great, and she never begged for a rest. Most of the time, it was Tigerstripe who suggested a rest or a drink of water. It seemed the she-cat's stamina was eternal.

Sunlight had disappeared now, the forest instead being covered with dark gray clouds that rolled across the sky. A chill had set over the forest, and Tigerstripe shivered a bit as winter wind swept against him.

Jetfur, though she also seemed chilled, continued on through the wind with no complaints whatsoever, seeming only content on continuing to walk.

Coming up a hill, Tigerstripe saw the woods were vanishing and instead were replaced by rolling grassy hills. Thrilled to be out of the darkened woods, Tigerstripe quickened his pace some, Jetfur immediately doing the same. She also seemed thrilled to get into an open landscape.

"This way!" Tigerstripe called, leading her closer to the grassy hills.

Jetfur smiled and quickened her pace, tapping him with her tail. She nipped him and began to run past him. "Can't catch me!" she teased.

"Oh, yeah?" he asked, his legs beginning to run as well. "Bet I can!" he shouted, chasing her up the grassy hills.

Jetfur squeaked in laughter, racing around the grassy hills as the wind blew against her pelt. Tigerstripe chased after her happily, finding himself unable to control his laughter as well. He realized they were still young kits at heart, despite the fact they'd both been members of a ruthless clan.

His heart racing, Tigerstripe chased Jetfur through the fields. He enjoyed the cold wind blowing at his pelt, and he enjoyed watching Jetfur race along beside him. Unfortunately, there hadn't been too many opportunities for fun during their journey.

Beginning to get exhausted, Tigerstripe collapsed in a pile full of flowers, catching his breath. Grinning, he rolled around in the flowers, breathing in their sweet scent. Jetfur happily collapsed down beside him. She was panting as heavily as she was.

Tigerstripe glanced over at her and laughed heartily. Jetfur smiled and did the same.

For a moment, they remained that way, laying on their backs and glancing at the darkened sky as wind swept up past them. Tigerstripe hadn't felt this peaceful in a long time. He had no duties to worry about, no drama. Here, he felt free with the forest and woods. Was this what it was like to not be in a clan? He enjoyed the sense of freedom he received.

He glanced over at Jetfur, wondering if the same thoughts were running through her mind. Unfortunately, he didn't know her full story. She hadn't been born in MoonClan but had arrived as a young warrior. He wondered if she'd grown up in a clan as well.

Of course she had, Tigerstripe thought. *Why else would her name be Jetfur?*

He shook away the thoughts, guessing it wasn't right to start invading on Jetfur's personal life and asking about her history. Taking in one more deep breath, Tigerstripe opened his mouth, about to start asking whether or not they should start moving again.

Jetfur glanced over at him, looking ready to reply when a large boom erupted above them. Tigerstripe jumped and sat up in surprise, startled by the thunder that had swept across the grassy plains.

He supposed the weather would be making an interference in their travel after all.

Jetfur sat up too, clearly shocked, for as he looked at her, fear shone in her bright green eyes. Tigerstripe glanced up at the sky, his heart seizing as he watched a flash of light splitting through the gray clouds, like a claw raking through an enemy...

Chapter 5

Tigerstripe remained frozen as he watched the lightning fade from the sky, its horrific appearance being replaced with the large boom of thunder echoing ahead. Tigerstripe could feel every piece of hair on his body stand up, and a shudder passed through him.

Turning to Jetfur, he noticed fear flashing in her green eyes. She too seemed frozen, jumping as another flash of lightning streaked the dark sky.

Gathering courage, Tigerstripe shouted, "We need to get out of here!" Wind had now picked up, and the tiniest bit of rain began dripping down from the sky. Unfortunately, they were in the middle of a giant clearing with not a piece of shelter in sight.

Jetfur nodded in a frightened manner, and Tigerstripe took off across the field as fast as his legs could carry him. He turned back, relieved to see Jetfur quickly following after him. Unfortunately, her pace was much slower, and Tigerstripe feared she'd fall behind.

"Come on!" he shouted, watching as she picked up her pace.

The rain was coming down harder now, and the wind blew the ice-cold droplets against Tigerstripe's pelt, soaking it. Tigerstripe shivered but continued to run, desperately looking to the forest ahead for any type of shelter. As he ran, however, it seemed that the field just continued to go on forever, and he felt as if he were trapped in a maze of golden grass.

Turning back once more, Jetfur was still following behind him, though not as quickly. Tigerstripe, nervous, trusted she'd continue running and hurried through the field as thunder rumbled in the sky above him.

He jumped as lightning flashed and struck a pine tree behind him. Not wanting to get distracted, Tigerstripe continued to run, the rain blinding him now as he desperately searched for a mere rock for him and Jetfur to crawl under as the storm passed.

Thunder echoed throughout the clearing again, chilling Tigerstripe to the bone. Up ahead he could finally see a distant clump of trees, and his heart lifted. The storm had not ceased but

was only becoming increasingly worse, and he wanted to escape.

"Jetfur!" he called, turning around to tell her the exciting news.

When he turned around, however, he froze in place, his heart beating rapidly. The jet black she-cat was no longer behind him. In fact, it seemed she was nowhere to be found.

Tigerstripe, his heart now pounding from Jetfur's disappearance rather than the running, glanced around. The rain blinded him, but he just had to find the dark she-cat. She couldn't be too far behind. He'd seen her only a few minutes before.

"Jetfur!" he called, glancing around. He leapt into the air as lightning lit up the field again. Even with the light from the bolt, however, he still could not see his friend anywhere. It was as if she'd completely vanished.

"She must've gotten lost," he muttered, still hoping to find her.

Turning around, Tigerstripe began to run back in the direction he'd come from, this time the rain being thrown at him in an opposite, even worse, direction. He was soaking wet and exhausted, but he couldn't just leave Jetfur behind.

"JETFUR! JETFUR!" he called, frantically looking around for the black she-cat. He paused for a moment and glanced around like he'd done earlier, but he still was unable to find the she-cat.

A sudden fear gripped hold of Tigerstripe. She couldn't be dead, could she? He was unsure how she could die in a mere storm, but he had visions of her collapsing in the field or perhaps being struck by lightning, not that he had ever seen more-or-less heard of a cat being struck by lightning before.

Stopping in his place and panting, out of breath, Tigerstripe glanced around and headed in an entirely new direction, knowing it was more important to find Jetfur than seek shelter. He couldn't leave her out in the storm alone.

But what if she's found shelter, he wondered. He shook his head, knowing it didn't matter. He just had to find Jetfur, regardless of how long it took.

"JETFUR!" he screeched desperately as he ran through the never-ending golden grass that was now soaked with rainwater. Mud had gathered on Tigerstripe's paws, and bits of grass clung to his wet pelt.

As he continued to run and frantically search for the she-

cat, he could feel himself growing more tired, and it seemed as if his energy was slowly dying out. He found his pace slowing down, and he stopped for a moment to catch his breath before seeking the she-cat again.

When he started up his run again through the field, he felt his legs grow heavy, and in a few moments, he had collapsed on the damp grass and felt the world fading from his view. The only sound he could hear was the distant rumble of thunder and the clamor of rain hitting the floor.

Tigerstripe opened his eyes, expecting to be dead or still laying in the storm-infested field. Instead, he found himself not in a clearing but an entirely different forest. He froze and slowly stood up, glancing around.

This was not like any forest he'd seen before. No sunlight peeked through the leaves of the trees, and a darkness had settled around him. Dark trees loomed in front of him with dark clumps of moss hanging like vines from the sharp branches of the trees.

I'm dead, Tigerstripe guessed, at first believing he'd found himself in StarClan. Instead, however, he knew that this forest had to be the Dark Forest. And that meant...

"I've died and gone to the Dark Forest!" he exclaimed, pacing around frantically. Jetfur was probably still out in the storm while he'd gotten himself killed and landed in an unfriendly eternal home.

A shadow lingered in the distance, which caught Tigerstripe's eye. He froze and spun toward the direction he'd seen it, calling out in the bravest voice, "Who-who's there?"

From the darkness he could only make out a pair of glowing red eyes that were all too familiar to him. A moment later, a sleek figure crept out of the bushes. Tigerstripe felt his heart beat rapidly as the figure emerged.

It was a sleek and petite silver-blue she-cat with emerald green eyes. Tigerstripe squinted in the dim light, gulping as he caught sight of the light reflecting off the she-cat's sharp claws.

He knew this cat all too well. It was none other than the former leader of MoonClan and his mother, Moonstar. He believed he had been free from her powerful rule when she had died, but he knew this was no longer the case.

"What are you--" he began, only to be silenced by his

mother.

A cracking sound came behind Jetfur, and he spun around.

"Jetfur?" he asked, glancing around. But the sound never came again, and it seemed like no cat was there.

"Tigerstripe," Moonstar said, causing Tigerstripe's attention to return back to his mother.

"I'm dead, I'm dead," he muttered, beginning to pace around.

"You are not dead," Moonstar replied in a growling manner.

Tigerstripe froze, relief flooding over him. He hadn't completely abandoned Jetfur. He was still alive, which meant...Jetfur was still stuck in the storm, and he had failed to find her.

"Send me back then!" he called desperately. "Oh, please, send me back! Wake up, wake up! I need to find Jetfur!"

Moonstar only rolled her eyes and growled slowly.

"Don't go after Jetfur," Moonstar warned. "She never meant anything to MoonClan, and she will never mean anything to you."

"Don't tell me what I should believe!" Tigerstripe hissed, unsheathing his claws.

"She never did anything for MoonClan!" Moonstar growled.

"So what if she's an 'embarrassment?'" he replied angrily. "She's not under your control anymore!"

"Tigerstripe, do you really think I'm an embarrassment?" a quiet voice muttered behind him. Tigerstripe spun around, watching as a familiar black she-cat slid out of the dark bushes and into the light.

"Say yes!" Moonstar hissed, her eyes brightening with a chance for pain to be felt.

"She isn't!" Tigerstripe hissed at his mother, defending the she-cat.

Moonstar growled. "How dare you, you ungrateful tom!" she spat.

Tigerstripe ignored his mother and glanced over at Jetfur. "Jetfur, what are you doing here? Why are you in the Dark Forest?" he wondered. Was she dead? Or was she too having a dream?

Jetfur did not say anything but instead stared blankly at him. Tigerstripe eagerly awaited an answer, but the silence was suddenly interrupted by a loud hissing sound that rattled the trees and shook the ground.

A whisper began to echo throughout the clearing where Tigerstripe, Jetfur, and Moonstar stood. Then, a luminous figure began to slither out of the shadows, the hiss growing louder as it came nearer. Barely able to make out the shapeless figure, Tigerstripe felt his heart rate grow quicker as the figure's eyes glowed amber and a pink forked tongue slipped out.

Noticing it coming for Jetfur, Tigerstripe leapt in front of the she-cat, growling at this unknown creature.

"Don't touch her!" he hissed, wanting to protect his friend with all his might.

Jetfur stood frozen like a statue. The shape slithered over the she-cat, opening its mouth to reveal sharp white fangs.

"Jetfur, get out of here!" Tigerstripe screeched as the creature came closer. He launched himself at the figure of darkness and clawed at its rough skin, hoping he'd buy some time for her to escape.

The dark shape fled from his grasp and dropped down on the she-cat, enclosing her in a prison of teeth. Jetfur remained motionless, as if she felt no pain at all.

"Jetfur!" Tigerstripe screeched, his voice hoarse.

The thing flicked its tongue, a splash of liquid landing on Tigerstripe. He knew immediately this was venom, as it began to sting on contact.

Jetfur, now aware she was trapped in the sharp prison of teeth began to scream loudly. The monster closed its mouth, causing Jetfur's scream to die away. The figure then lifted its head, its amber eyes turning toward Tigerstripe with an evil glow.

"Jetfur!" he screamed, the pain becoming much worse. He knew it was useless calling for her. She was gone, and that was that.

The figure slithered once more and approached Tigerstripe, this time whispering a few words.

"Your love isss no more...I am the cobra. Beware Tigerssssstripe," it spoke in a whispery and cold manner.

Feeling himself losing focus of the world around him now, Tigerstripe watched as the shadow-like figure opened its mouth, Jetfur's scream echoing from inside of it. Then, the scream broke apart, and Tigerstripe lost consciousness with the glowing amber eyes still in his mind.

Tigerstripe opened his eyes to find sunlight beating down on him.

He stood up suddenly, a sharp pain running down his back. His pelt was dirty and coated in grass and mud. His fur was matted and tangled from the mud and water that had clung to it.

Despite this pain he felt, relief suddenly fled through him, and he sniffed the air. It had all been a dream. Jetfur could still be alive! He had to go find her!

"Jetfur!" he called.

He froze suddenly as a voice spoke beside him.

"Are you okay?"

He turned, his eyes falling on a tabby with a ripped ear sitting beside him, her eyes full of concern.

Chapter 6

Tigerstripe for a moment froze, staring at the unknown she-cat. He shuddered, wondering how long she'd been watching him. Had she just arrived? Had she been with him since however long ago he'd blacked out? He eyed her suspiciously, unsure of whether this was a she-cat to be trusted or not.

Still, she seemed to glance at him in a generally concerned manner, as if she really did care about his health. Tigerstripe's mind suddenly darted back to Jetfur, and he glanced around, suddenly realizing he'd never answered the she-cat's question.

"Uh, yeah, I'm fine," he quickly replied, making eye contact with the tabby. "I was looking for my..." He paused, not sure how to describe Jetfur in relationship to him. Was she an acquaintance, a partner?

"I was looking for my friend," he decided.

"Oh," the she-cat replied, glancing at him curiously and tilting her head. "It looked as if you were having a nightmare."

Tigerstripe stiffened, recalling the snake's jaws crushing Jetfur as she screeched for mercy.

The she-cat didn't seem to notice Tigerstripe's sudden spark of fear, and she continued to introduce herself. "My name is Snakepelt."

At the word *snake,* Tigerstripe flinched, trying to rid the horrid creature from his mind. He instead focused on introducing himself to the tabby.

"I'm Tigerstripe," he explained. He paused for a moment, then added, "And yes, I was having a nightmare."

Snakepelt nodded, as if the pieces were slowly coming to her. After a few heartbeats, she quietly spoke.

"May I show you my clan?" she wondered.

Tigerstripe glanced at her oddly, not really sure why she had such a desire to introduce him to her clan. He didn't even know there was a clan around here. And as he thought about it, he really did need to find Jetfur. She could've been anywhere by now...

"It's best you get checked by the medicine cat," Snakepelt further explained. "It seems like you've been through a lot as it is."

Tigerstripe nodded, glad the she-cat was keeping her distance from his personal affairs. Not once had she asked why he'd been out here or what he was doing. He pondered, supposing that Jetfur could very well have arrived at Snakepelt's clan.

"All right," he agreed, rising and stretching his sore muscles.

Snakepelt nodded and motioned Tigerstripe forward. Together, they began walking out of the meadow and through the trees, raindrops hanging off the branches and leaves from the storm. As Tigerstripe wandered, he was amazed by the beauty of the forest. It seemed no lightning had struck this part of the forest.

The chirping of birds now became audible, and the dew of the leaves glinted in the fresh sunlight. As they continued their silent journey to Snakepelt's clan, the forest began to get more and more green. Why had MoonClan never looked like this?

As he passed by some rocks, moss filled every crevace, and vines hung from branches. There was a buzzing of insects nearby, and Tigerstripe glanced around curiously. How could this forest possibly be in the season of leaf-bare? It seemed as if it were instead green-leaf.

As Tigerstripe swatted with his tail at insects nearby, Snakepelt did not at all seemed bothered and continued to walk happily.

"Wow," was all Tigerstripe managed to say.

Snakepelt must've heard his comment, but she did not reply. Instead, she came to a halt at two large leaves. She pulled them back to reveal an enormous clearing. As Tigerstripe peered through the opening of the leaves, he noticed cats padding about, meowing to each other. Kits were wrestling with each other and shouting in a loud manner while the queens watched and toms laughed hardily.

Snakepelt glanced over at Tigerstripe, clearly noticing the amazement in his eyes.

"Welcome to my clan," she said.

Tigerstripe smiled, imagining himself living in this clan. Everyone seemed so joyous and happy working together in this community. There were no severe punishments, no public slaughters in the center of camp, no vigorous training so that they could later kill innocent cats. It seemed the cats all had enough to eat too, for all were in their best shape. The prey must've been evenly distributed, not only given to cats who deserved it, like in MoonClan.

Tigerstripe followed Snakepelt slowly into the camp, unsure of what the reactions of these clan cats would be when they saw him. He hoped they hadn't heard of MoonClan, or if they had, he hoped that they would not recognize him as a MoonClan tom.

A gray tabby kit seemed to be having a good play-fight with another tabby until it started to tumble backwards and bump into Tigerstripe's leg. She was laughing a great deal until she turned around and saw the striped tom.

"Uh-uhm, sorry, sir," she mewed quietly, backing up a few paw-steps.

Tigerstripe's heart shattered. Did he look that intimidating? He supposed he was one of the larger toms with strong, muscular legs and a broad chest. He really didn't seem to fit in here.

A black and white queen gasped at Tigerstripe as if he'd done something to frighten the kit. She ran over to the kit and curled her tail protectively around the gray tabby kitten. Glaring at Tigerstripe, she picked up her daughter by the scruff and padded away.

"What's wrong?" Tigerstripe asked.

Snakepelt glanced at him, seemingly unphased by the whole encounter.

"Oh, that's just Mossytail," she explained. "Don't mind her. She's very protective of her kits, that's all."

"Oh," he replied, a bit relieved.

"So, what clan are you from?" Snakepelt asked curiously as Tigerstripe glanced around, trying to see if perhaps Jetfur had wandered here.

Tigerstripe felt ashamed of mentioning MoonClan, so he thus replied, "I don't want to talk about my clan."

The tabby nodded respectively but looked a bit uncomfortable. It seemed she had noticed that they were the center of attention, as now many cats were turning heads and glancing up to stare at the both of them. A few queens seemed to be gossiping, and Tigerstripe could detect annoyance in Snakepelt.

Trying to lighten the mood, he began to speak.

"Well, maybe I should tell you about my clan," he decided. "It might help me find my...friend. I belonged to MoonClan, a vicious and bloodthirsty clan run by my mother, Moonstar. We worked hard to beat another clan in battle, but we failed, and the deputy ended the clan and told us to choose between becoming a

clan cat somewhere else of a rogue. Jetfur joined me as a rogue, and we were heading toward my birthplace when a storm came and we became separated," he explained.

Before Snakepelt could reply, an old gray tom stepped out of a nearby den, his fur shaggy and matted. His old and crackled meow rang across the clearing, the noise so dreadful that all of the cats fell silent. The tom looked in both directions, and once he knew there was total silence, he set his eyes intensely on Tigerstripe, causing Snakepelt to wince.

"Who...is this?" the gray tom inquired, pointing a claw shakily at Tigerstripe.

"Oh, I'm Tigerstripe," he explained.

"And you are from...MoonClan, eh?" he wondered, apparently having overheard their conversation. Snakepelt was clawing at the ground nervously beside Tigerstripe, making Tigerstripe wonder if he too perhaps should be worried.

The tom turned to Snakepelt now.

"Snakepelt."

"Yes?"

"So, you have decided to bring in a complete stranger without my permission?"

Snakepelt glanced down at her paws and then glanced back up, gulping.

"He was alone, Graystar," she explained. "I didn't want to leave him there for the...you-know-what."

Tigerstripe tilted his head. You-know-what?

"I apologize, Graystar," he said to the leader. "A bad storm hit and my friend went missing. Snakepelt found me and invited me here. I can leave if you wish."

Graystar narrowed his eyes for a few heartbeats. Finally, his shoulders relaxed, and he sighed, turning back to Snakepelt.

"Hm. If you are sure, Snakepelt, that this cat is no danger..." Graystar paused to cough madly, and the voices of the clan members started to raise with worry. Clearly the tom had to be on his last life.

The leader cleared his throat and finally regained the ability to speak again.

"Then...He can-eh-stay."

The clan yowled in disagreement, but the loudest voice out of all was Mossytail, who stepped forward angrily. She stared

scornfully at Tigerstripe, then turned to her leader.

"What about the kits?! This cat could hurt them!" she hissed.

"Are you *kidding,* Mossytail?!" Snakepelt replied angrily, which surprised Tigerstripe. "Does this cat look like a threat?"

Tigerstripe felt like he should be seen as a threat, coming from a vicious clan. Perhaps coming here was not the best idea after all.

Mossytail bristled angrily. "I'm telling you that cat could hurt my precious kits!" She bent down, nuzzling the two kits who clung to her legs.

"Your kits will be *fine,* Mossytail," Snakepelt reassured her. "It's not like they're mice with a million predators out to get them."

The white and black she-cat unsheathed her claws, ready to lunge at the tabby.

"ENOUGH!" Graystar shouted, standing up. "This cat can stay here for the time being. End of period. GOOD DAY!"

And with those words, he padded back inside his den.

"I can leave if you want," Tigerstripe spoke.

But it seemed no one was around to hear him. After Graystar left, the other cats scattered back into their little groups. Mossytail, however, still remained where she was, shouting, "Yes, please do!"

Snakepelt scowled and approached the she-cat. "He won't leave unless he wants to. You raising your kits so soft is going to affect their abilities, you know. They won't even want to hunt knowing a fox could be nearby."

Mossytail rolled her eyes while Tigerstripe stepped back, unsure why these two were such bitter enemies.

"Oh, like *you* would know how to raise kits!" she snarled. "You'll never have any."

Snakepelt's eyes became filled with tears, and she stood there, motionless.

"Don't talk about it? Well, too late!" Mossytail snapped cruelly. "You will never know what love is."

And with that, Snakepelt froze and Mossytail padded away with her kits, leaving Snakepelt to remain in her position, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I better go," Tigerstripe suggested.

Snakepelt shook her head, wiping the tears away. "It's best you see the medicine cat and at least stay here for the night. You

can leave when you want, but...Just stay the night."

Tigerstripe nodded, wondering if perhaps his time spent here would help him get any information of Jetfur. The sun was already beginning to set, and he supposed he'd have more time to investigate in the morning. For the time being, he went to the medicine cat den, where he was inspected and declared a quick recovery. Afterwards, he shared a mouse with Snakepelt, who still seemed upset, and then headed off to bed, sleeping in a spare nest.

As Tigerstripe closed his eyes to sleep, he wondered what Mossytail and Snakepelt's argument had been about and why Snakepelt seemed so unpopular with her clanmates. His mind then filled with Jetfur again, and as he drifted off, he silently prayed to StarClan he'd find her soon.

Chapter 7

Tigerstripe awoke the next morning, finding that most of the clan members were already out of their nests. He pricked his ears, listening to the commotion of camps as they ran around camp, preparing for the day. It sounded so calm to the sounds he used to hear in the MoonClan camp. Usually they were shouts of anger, whimpers, and a lot of hissing.

"Hey, you're finally up," came a voice beside him.

Tigerstripe turned to see Snakepelt sitting up, licking one of her paws. He hadn't meant to sleep so late, though exhaustion seemed to overtake him.

"Yeah, and I'm starving. Where's the food around here?"

Snakepelt led Tigerstripe toward the fresh-kill pile situated in the middle of camp. He smiled, glad to see each cat got their own share of the prey. He, of course, always got prey in MoonClan for working so well, but did Jetfur?

As Tigerstripe picked out a plump rabbit for himself, his mind suddenly raced back to Jetfur. He knew he couldn't stay here long. A day or two more, perhaps. Was Jetfur wandering alone in the woods searching for him? Or perhaps she was dead...

No, Tigerstripe couldn't think like that. He shook his head and bit into his breakfast.

"I'll be back in a little bit," Snakepelt explained as she finished gulping down her mouse. "I think I may be on patrol today."

Tigerstripe nodded, watching as she went off. He sighed, feeling awkward now. The other cats had turned their attention toward him and were watching the stranger. Tigerstripe tried to look away, but the several eyes turned on him were embarassing. Nearby, cats were whispering to each other, and Tigerstripe tried to ignore the glares from Mossytail as her kits played near her.

Tigerstripe was saved, however, when Graystar approached him, a warm smile on the old tom's face.

"Good to see you're doing well, Tigerstripe," he explained.

Tigerstripe nodded. "You've been very kind to me here," he replied. "Thank you for taking me in so suddenly."

Graystar smiled once more. "It's a pleasure. And Snakepelt seems to like you very much."

Tigerstripe nodded, about to announce that he'd probably leave soon, when Graystar spoke once more.

"Why did you say you were here again?"

"I-I was traveling with a friend, Jetfur, and we got separated in this storm, you see--"

"Jetfur, you say?" came a raspy voice.

Both Graystar and Tigerstripe spun around to find an old orange she-cat, most likely an elder, listening in on their conversation.

Tigerstripe eyed the she-cat with suspicion. "Um, yes," he said. "Do you-do you know where she is?"

The orange tabby thought for a moment. "I believe so," she replied, causing Tigerstripe's heart to beat rapidly. Perhaps Jetfur wasn't too far off!

"I had a friend awhile back," the elder continued. "She had a black short, shiny coat. Her name was Blackpelt, and she gave birth to kits shortly after I gave birth to my own. Blackpelt's delivery did not go well, and one was born dead," she explained, looking down with grief. "But the other, though small and weak, just barely made it. She looked just like her mother...Blackpelt named her Jetkit."

The ginger she-cat took on a lighter tone now as she talked about Jetfur. "That Jetkit was always a quiet one," she remarked. "Never had much to say."

"That's Jetfur!" Tigerstripe gasped. The description of both her pelt and her personality matched perfectly. "Where can I find her?!" he asked, excitedly, startling the old she-cat.

The elder blinked for a moment. "Well, I don't know where in particular. My daughter knows much more about her than I do. They had a strong friendship, you know."

"Who's your daughter? Where is she?" Tigerstripe demanded, becoming more frantic by the minute.

The she-cat chuckled. "Well, I have more than one daughter, but I think the one you're looking for is right over there," she said, pointing her tail directly at Snakepelt.

"Snakepelt?!" Tigerstripe asked, astonished. Who knew he had somehow run into the best friend of Jetfur?

The she-cat nodded, leaving Tigerstripe to quickly run towards Snakepelt.

"Snakepelt! Snakepelt!" he called frantically, leaving the helpful elder and Graystar in the dust.

Snakepelt spun around in alarm. "What? What?" she gasped, looking around. "Is the clan being invaded?"

"No, but I heard you were friends with Jetfur," he explained, watching as Snakepelt suddenly settled down, now aware that the clan was safe. "I need your help in finding her."

The tabby she-cat tilted her head for a moment, as if she were processing her thoughts. Suddenly, her eyes flashed with an unbelievable look in them.

"Jetkit!" she exclaimed. She then stopped, her mood settling into a grim one once more. "But how do I know you're talking about the same cat I am thinking of?"

"She has the sleekest black fur I've ever seen," Tigerstripe explained. "And she's quiet, doesn't talk much, but when you get to know her..."

"That must be her!" Snakepelt exclaimed, almost excited as Tigerstripe. "Yes, yes, I remember now," she continued, causing Tigerstripe to become more excited by the minute. He was this close!

"We were best friends until..." Snakepelt's voice wandered off, and she glanced down, her excitement vanishing in a flash.

"Until what?" Tigerstripe asked, becoming more anxious with each second that passed.

"I-I don't like to talk about it," Snakepelt muttered, glancing down at her paws and refusing to make any sort of eye contact with him.

"Please," Tigerstripe begged. "Jetfur means a great deal to me, and whatever you know might help me find her."

Snakepelt remained silent.

"Please," Tigerstripe murmured once more, this time quieter. He knew Snakepelt wasn't obligated to spill her past to him. After all, they'd just met. But he felt that they had a growing friendship already and that she could trust him.

"Snakepelt, Graystar wants you on hunting patrol," a white she-cat mewed from behind Snakepelt.

"But she has to finish telling me something!" Tigerstripe argued. He finally made eye contact with Snakepelt, saying, "You will tell me, won't you?"

Snakepelt sighed, turning to face the other she-cat.

"Cleverspirit, tell Graystar I'll come in just a heartbeat."

The white she-cat, Cleverspirit, nodded and went off once more, leaving Tigerstripe and Snakepelt alone again.

"So, what happened?" Tigerstripe asked after a short period of silence.

Snakepelt took a deep breath and began.

"Well, Jetkit and I were best friends as kits. We grew up alongside each other. We played constantly, night and day, until our mothers pushed us to bed, and even then, we always slept near each other. We were inseparable," she recalled, a faint smile appearing as she spoke.

"The friendship, however, did not last long. These horrible cats came to our clan, a different clan at the time, and demanded we leave, or else they'd do something terrible to all of us. Jetkit's mother did not approve and argued that the cats leave us in peace..." She paused for a moment before continuing her story.

"Blackpelt fought for us and was killed. My mother, Orangeflower, tried to take me, my siblings, and Jetkit to a safe place. It was going well until we were pursued. Jetkit had fallen behind, and while I had tried to assist my friend when the cats caught up to her, my mother held me back, and I watched as the cats left with Jetkit as a prisoner of their clan."

Tigerstripe paused. "That's...terrible," he said, suddenly realizing why Jetfur was so against clan life. As a young kit she had been oppressed by evil cats, and joining MoonClan had brought her even more suffering.

"I never knew what their clan customs were or if they ever hurt her," Snakepelt sniffed, tears gathering in her eyes.

"Hang on!" he gasped. "Was one of the cats who took her a silver-blue she-cat?" he asked, wondering if perhaps these were MoonClan cats. He had never heard of his mother capturing young kits, but then again, there were several things about Moonstar he had never and would never be aware of.

"I don't remember," Snakepelt murmured, still upset. She glanced back up at Tigerstripe, her eyes focusing on his. "But I do remember this terrible tabby with green eyes that killed Jetkit's mother."

"That's all you remember?" Tigerstripe asked, a bit disappointed. This story had not helped him find Jetfur at all. It had only given him a small insight into the she-cat's life. "Do you

remember the clan name? The names of any of the cats? Do you even remember the cats besides the tabby with green eyes?" he asked, suddenly finding his voice raising with anger.

"No, I'm sorry," Snakepelt replied. "I was only a kit, and I wasn't polite enough to ask their names," she snapped, suddenly growing angry as well.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!" she hissed, hitting her tail against the ground. "Now, excuse me, but I've got a patrol to tend to," she growled, pushing past Tigerstripe.

"Fine!" he hissed, anger flooding through him. He didn't need Jetfur or this stupid clan to give him help. He'd find Jetfur on his own.

Padding angrily toward the forest, he glanced back at the clan one last time and disappeared into the woods. He'd just have to find Jetfur on his own.

Chapter 8

Tigerstripe sulkingly meandered through the woods outside of Snakepelt's clan's camp, going over their argument again and again in his head. He was glad he'd left Snakepelt and the clan. Clearly they were of no help. Sure, Snakepelt might've had a connection to Jetfur, but her words offered no help.

As he padded through the forest draped with vines and tall trees, he wondered if he had any clue as to where he was going. He knew he was away from camp, but was he still in their territory?

He shrugged off these thoughts. It wasn't important. It didn't matter where he went. He just needed to get away from the clan and back to Jetfur. Finding her was the most important thing right now.

His mind drifted toward the black she-cat. He sympathized with the she-cat, now knowing she'd had a tough life as a kit. He wondered where those cats had taken her, what clan she lived in, and how she'd managed up in MoonClan. He told himself he would ask these questions when he found her, which would hopefully be soon.

As these thoughts flooded through his mind, Tigerstripe felt something clutch onto his leg. He paused for a moment, at first thought expecting it to be a butterfly or some bug that had landed on him. But no, this was heavier and furrier.

In a split second, he wondered if perhaps it was his lucky day, and a mouse had caught onto him, begging that it be eaten by him. But he knew this was not the case.

Whatever the thing was, it began to make faint squeaking sounds, sort of like a mouse. But it was far too large to be a mouse. *Is it a young kit?* Tigerstripe wondered upon first glancing down.

As he focused on the figure more though, he noticed that the creature had bright orange fur and two large pointed ears. The creature glanced up at him frightened, its green eyes glowing with fear. A pointy muzzle extended out of its face, stained with dry blood. And to top it all off, its bushy tail was curled around its body.

The creature appeared to be bleeding and clung to

Tigerstripe with desperation, sniffling a bit.

Tigerstripe couldn't believe his eyes. A fox kit had grabbed onto his leg and was not trying to harm him. He paused for a moment, wondering if this was a trap. Surely a mother fox was nearby waiting to pounce on him.

The tiny fox kit, upon making eye contact with Tigerstripe, suddenly let go of its clutch on his leg and plopped to the ground, blurting out words in its language in a frustrated manner. Apparently it had just now realized that Tigerstripe was a cat and not a fox.

"Um...okay," Tigerstripe murmured, glancing at the fox.

Whoever this fox was, Tigerstripe knew it wasn't a good idea to stick around the fox, especially with a mother that might be around. So he glanced at the fox kit one last time and began on his way again, now focused only on finding Jetfur.

He paused, however, hearing footsteps behind him. The small fox blinked and rubbed its eyes, following Tigerstripe quietly.

Tigerstripe shook his head, knowing the fox surely couldn't keep following him. So he continued on his way, believing that in a few more steps, the fox would turn around and run to its mother for sure.

But as Tigerstripe kept walking and turning back his head, he noticed the fox kit still trotting behind quietly. Becoming frustrated, Tigerstripe suddenly spun around to face the young fox.

"Why are you following me?!" he demanded.

The tiny fox froze and paused for a few moments before answering.

"Me wants see goes where cat," it answered in a jumble of cat language.

Tigerstripe froze, astounded. He hadn't even known it was possible for a fox to learn the language of cats and execute it. Sure, it hadn't spoken well, but he had still understood it.

"Yeah, well," Tigerstripe answered, still amazed, "You are a fox. I am a cat. Foxes and cats aren't friends."

The blood stained fox kit tilted her head curiously, wondering, "Why?"

Tigerstripe groaned, approaching the fox kit.

"Let me make this clear for you," he explained, becoming frustrated. This kit was taking up his time and was certainly not making it any easier to find Jetfur. "Fox kills cat, which makes cat

mad. Fox and cats therefore enemies. Make sense, kid?"

"Never me cat kill!" she shouted loudly. "Cats me like!"

"Um, your mommy and daddy kill cat," Tigerstripe explained, praying the young fox kit would just wander off. "You don't kill cats because you're too young."

"Whatever. Me cat follow anyway," she yipped, his words not affecting her at all.

Tigerstripe growled quietly. "But when you get older," he continued, "you'll get mad at cats. A cat is bound to attack you."

"But cat me follow anyways," she replied with the same determination. Her eyes glowed as she said this, and she swayed her bloody tail back and forth.

"Whatever!" Tigerstripe hissed, no longer going to waste his time with the fox kit. If she wanted to join him, then fine. He was sure she'd run off eventually. After all, what fox wanted to hang around with a cat?

Tigerstripe continued on his way, listening to the footsteps of the young fox trotting behind him. He tried his best to ignore her, meandering through the forest as best as he could, but her footsteps still rang in his ears as a constant reminder of her presence.

He didn't speak to the fox again for the rest of the day. He continued on his way as the sun moved across as the sky, the fox still behind him. He had tried quickening his pace a few times throughout the day, but the young fox had just picked up her own pace and easily caught up to him.

He had not expected so much persistance from a young fox. He wondered why she even wanted to follow him. He didn't want to responsible for this fox. He hoped the mother fox would just come and swoop her up eventually or she'd just head home.

Unfortunately, none of Tigerstripe's plans seemed to work. Throughout the day, when he hunted, he'd hunt his prey and eat it, laughing to himself as the fox tried to catch her own prey. Often, she failed, and Tigerstripe expected the fox to turn around once she realized she would not be fed with his help.

This, however, failed. What Tigerstripe left behind, the young fox would pick up and take bites along the way, still managing to keep up with the tom. He had to admit, perhaps he had left some food on purpose, feeling sorry for the fox, but he certainly hoped she'd turn away soon.

But soon the sky grew darker and darker, glowing from yellow, to orange, to now a deep indigo. Tigerstripe knew he'd have to find a place to sleep in these foreign woods. As he glanced around the darkened forest, he desperately searched for shelter among the trees that looked like spiders scraping the air.

Soon enough, he found a clump of trees that looked like it would provide some amount of shelter. He turned around, seeing the fox was still following behind. She lagged a little, but she still had a clear view on Tigersripe.

Tigerstripe curled up under a few trees, watching the young fox curl up a few foxlengths from him. He sighed and rested his head on his large paws, praying the fox would be gone the next morning.

But for now, he was exhausted, and before he could stress anymore about the fox or about his quest for finding Jetfur, he found his eyes slowly drooping, trapping him in a deep sleep.

Tigerstripe awoke to find himself in none other than the Dark Forest. As soon as he opened his eyes and saw the darkened, dead-looking wood on the trees and the disgusting moss and vines that hung from their branches, he knew this was no ordinary dream.

But no cats were nearby, there was no cobra slithering up to him, and there certainly was no Jetfur.

"Where am I?" Tigerstripe murmured, spinning around and looking for any signs of movement. He half-expected his mother to leap out of some nearby bushes, but all remained quiet.

The silence frightened Tigerstripe, and he could hear his heartbeat beating rapidly with every second of growing silence.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of footsteps. Every hair on Tigerstripe's body stood on its end, his pelt spiking up with fear. He spun around, expecting to see some terrifying monster or a bloodthirsty warrior banished to the Dark Forest long ago.

He did not expect to find Jetfur standing in front of him.

"TIGERSTRIPE! I FOUND YOU!" she exclaimed.

Tigerstripe backed up, confused. How could this be possible? She seemed so real, standing there, her eyes glowing with excitement.

"I...Jetfur? No, it can't be. I'm not where I was sleeping! This is a dream!" he exclaimed.

Suddenly, Jetfur banished, being replaced by a tortoiseshell

she-cat. She stood in front of him, laughing to herself.

"This isn't a dream. You're awake," she explained.

"Who-who are you?" Tigerstripe asked, desperately confused. Where had Jetfur gone? Who was this unknown she-cat?

"I'm kidding," she replied, laughing a little. "My name is Daisyflower."

Tigerstripe eyed Daisyflower with suspicion. She seemed too kind to be in the Dark Forest.

"What?" Tigerstripe asked, not sure what other words to say. "But why? What are you doing here? Where's Jetfur?"

"Never mind that. It doesn't matter—GET UP, CAT!"

Tigerstripe dream was shattered to pieces as he recognized the familiar voice of the fox. His eyes burst open, and within a moment, the entire Dark Forest and Daisyflower had vanished.

Chapter 9

Tigerstripe's eyes sprang open to find the young she-fox leaning over him with curiosity. His heart beat rapidly, at first alarmed by the desperation in the fox's voice, but he found her calm and collected, pushing at his side with her small paws. As Tigerstripe began to rise, the fox moved away, smiling.

It was morning now, and the sun was shining its golden rays over the unknown forest that Tigerstripe and his new fox friend had wandered into.

Tigerstripe stared at the fox, sighing. He had secretly wished that she would've gone in the middle of the night back to her family.

"Oh, you're still here," he grumbled to himself, his stomach growling.

"What?" the fox asked, confused as to why Tigerstripe would expect her to be missing.

Tigerstripe sighed and glanced around at the new day before him. Perhaps today would be the day he found Jetfur, or so he thought. He would tell himself this every single day, but he found himself coming no closer to finding his black-furred friend. Instead, all he'd found was an insane she-cat and a young fox who were clearly of little help.

"Guess I could do for some breakfast," he muttered, ignoring the fox's pacing around him.

He ventured farther into the woods, the fox following behind just as she'd done the day prior. He knew now there was probably no way in StarClan that she'd turn around and go home to her family, so he continued on his way, keeping his eye out for any signs of prey that would satisfy his empty stomach.

As he continued across the forest floor, his eyes caught movement by a nearby bush. He at once spotted rabbit ears popping up near the bush, and he crouched down, stalking towards the prey. The fox, knowing how to handle the situation by now, froze and sat down, patiently waiting.

Tigerstripe cautiously approached the rabbit, watching as it nibbled on a nearby berry. As soon as it turned toward Tigerstripe,

its eyes widened in fear. Before it could move, however, Tigerstripe had already leapt and shoved his claws into its throat, killing it instantly.

The dead rabbit hanging limp in his jaws, Tigerstripe trotted happily back over to the fox and began nibbling on his rabbit, watching as the fox paced around for any sign of her own prey. Tigerstripe laughed to herself, knowing that catching the rabbit had been pure luck. It would be a miracle if she could catch any prey of her own.

Still, as Tigerstripe gnawed on the rabbit, he felt a pang of sympathy for the fox, and he wondered if Jetfur had ever been like this, hopelessly wandering in the forest for some prey or something to eat. Sighing, Tigerstripe pushed the half-eaten rabbit away from him.

"You can have the rest," he said to the fox.

"Hurray!" the fox exclaimed, grabbing the rabbit from Tigerstripe and quickly gulping it down. For such a small fox, she had a large appetite.

Tigerstripe hoped feeding the fox wouldn't tempt her to stay. It was only meant as an act of kindness, but not an act of "I want you to travel with me" kindness.

So as soon as the fox had licked the rest of the rabbit clean, Tigerstripe got up on his way again and padded through the woods, his eyes scanning the trees for any movement, his nose held high in the air for any unknown scents.

The fox, happy that her stomach was satisfied, skipped closely behind him. Tigerstripe attempted to ignore her and continued on, hoping her skipping would come to an end.

The fox continued her skipping though and opened her mouth to begin singing a song in fox tongue. She wasn't the best singer, and her screech echoed through the woods. Tigerstripe shuddered and turned around to face her.

"Are you ever going to leave?" he wondered, rolling his eyes.

The little fox stopped her singing for a moment and pondered.

"Hm...Nope!" she exclaimed, beginning to skip again and screech her fox song.

"Ugh," Tigerstripe grunted, continuing to move through the forest.

This went on for what seemed like hours, Tigerstripe trudging through the woods while the fox still skipped behind him and sung a variety of fox songs that perhaps her mother had taught her as a young kit.

Suddenly, Tigerstripe swore he saw movement out of the corner of his eye by a nearby tree. He paused, then froze as the fox fell silent. Why had she stopped singing? After hours of singing, why had she stopped now?

"Why did you stop?" Tigerstripe asked, only now realizing her singing had comforted him. He enjoyed hearing someone speak rather than listening to silence.

The fox's ears were pricked, and she shivered to herself.

"Cat, listen," she whispered.

Tigerstripe listened, but all he could hear was absolute silence.

"What?" Tigerstripe hissed after a period of silence.

It was only a few heart beats later that he heard an off-putting sound.

Sssss.

It was a hissing sound, but much too smooth to belong to a cat.

"Uh..." Tigerstripe felt his heart began to beat rapidly, and he spun around to where the hissing sound was coming from.

A large snake, a cobra to be exact, slithered out from behind a tree. It towered over both Tigerstripe and the fox, its amber eyes radiating with evil. Tigerstripe couldn't help but think of the snake that had appeared in his dream that had swallowed Jetfur. He froze, unsure of what to do.

Tigerstripe's adrenaline finally began to work, and he shouted, "RUN!" taking off from the cobra. As he ran, however, he noticed there were no footsteps behind him, and he spun around to find the fox frozen in fear as the cobra advanced.

"No!" Tigerstripe hissed, racing back toward the very creature that was attempting to kill him. Before the snake could strike, he grabbed the fox kit by the scruff and took off as fast as his legs could carry him.

The cobra, though he assumed it to be slow, slithered very quickly after him. Tigerstripe's heart raced, and he raced faster and faster, trying to find any way to avoid the cobra's deadly strike.

Hearing the sound of rushing water, Tigerstripe advanced

after it and after racing through some bushes, he found a streaming river. Glancing back to see the cobra still approaching, Tigerstripe quickly leapt into the river with the fox still in his grip.

The fox squirmed as the cold water hit both of them, and Tigerstripe himself shivered as the water rushed against his pelt. He had never swam that much before, but he had to escape the deadly creature. And so he paddled as fast as he could across the river, struggling to keep hold of the fox and to keep both of them afloat.

The river's currents pushed at both sides of him, and he struggled to move against them. He thought of Jetfur, and this gave him the courage to continue swimming. Finally, he reached the edge of the river and plopped the wet and exhausted fox kit on the shore. Then, he climbed out of the river, soaking and exhausted, glancing back over at the cobra.

The cobra had stopped at the edge of the river Tigerstripe and the fox had crossed, its forked tongue rattling angrily. Its eyes' amber glow quickly faded as it disappeared back into the woods, leaving them alone. Tigerstripe looked down to see the little fox staring at where the fox had disappeared in great fear.

"Is it gone?" he asked, though he wasn't sure exactly who he was asking.

The little fox's eyes were bugged out in fear. She turned to him and slowly nodded, still shaken by the chase.

"Come on. Let's go," Tigerstripe instructed, turning around and heading back into the forest.

"But-but," the fox argued, her tail pointed to the spot where the cobra had disappeared.

"Come on!" he said, beginning to walk away.

After a few moments, the fox must've realized she didn't want to be left behind, and she quickly hurried after Tigerstripe.

"Cobra...in my dream was," she explained.

"Yeah, well, the cobra's gone, so let's go," he said, continuing to walk through the woods. He too was still shaken up from the chase, but he had to remain brave. He couldn't cower in fear over a measly snake. He had seen much worse things.

"But, cobra in dream cat catch, me cat tried save...But cobra swallowed," she spoke fearfully.

Tigerstripe paused, his odd dream coming back to him altogether now. He still could not close his eyes without seeing the jaws of the snake enclose around Jetfur.

"What cat?" he asked quietly.

"Uh, cat, black pelt. She-cat. Cobra hiss scary. 'Beware the cobra'."

"Jetfur!" Tigerstripe exclaimed, his heart pounding. How was it this fox had experienced the very same dream as he had?

"Who Jet?" she asked, looking very confused.

"A cat I'm looking for," Tigerstripe exclaimed.

"Met named cat 'Jetfur' once too. Shelter needed so me her allowed to stay in me den," she explained casually. "All wet from storm."

"What?!" Tigerstripe exclaimed, shocked. This fox must've seen Jetfur immediately after the storm! Perhaps she wasn't useless to him after all!

"Do you know where she went?" he demanded.

"Kind of," the fox spoke weakly. "Me her walked den out of for little bit. Then me left. Come back to den." She stopped, glancing back up at Tigerstripe. "Sorry, cat, language bad."

"Can you take me back to your den?" he wondered, thinking that perhaps he'd be able to catch a whiff of Jetfur and follow the clues from there.

"Follow," the fox replied, beginning to walk.

It was odd with the fox leading the way now, but Tigerstripe obeyed and followed her throughout the remainder of the day, excitement flooding through him. Perhaps he was closer to finding Jetfur than he thought! Oh, just the very idea of seeing her again filled him with excitement!

They walked for a long time until the sky once again began to get dark. Tigerstripe searched the forest for some type of shelter until he spotted a nearby log.

"In there," he said, pointing out the log to the fox. "We can sleep in there."

"Okay," the little fox agreed, stepping inside after Tigerstripe.

Tigerstripe curled up inside the log, the fox curling up next to him. It was a tight squeeze, but Tigerstripe didn't really mind. At least he'd soon see Jetfur again. That was all that mattered.

Chapter 10

Tigerstripe slowly opened his eyes to find a bright light filtering through a narrow hole in the log. Squinting against the sunlight, he realized that it was daytime already, and he stretched his sore limbs slowly.

His mind suddenly thought back to the day prior, how the cobra had almost attacked them, how he'd fearlessly saved the fox, and how this fox was somehow going to show him to Jetfur. His heart began to pound just thinking about it. He couldn't wait to see Jetfur again! The fox had been useful to him after all.

Tigerstripe slowly lifted his head, letting the rest of the tiredness wear off from him. He would need to be energetic today when the fox led him back to her cave. He knew Jetfur might be long gone, but there was a chance she was still there, and he couldn't risk losing that chance.

Excited and wanting to get going, Tigerstripe turned to his right where the fox had curled up beside him the night before and said in a loud voice, "Come on. Let's go."

He froze, then realized he was staring at nothing beside him. The fox's scent still sat on the log, but it was stale, and it seemed she had long gone. Tigerstripe froze, his eyes widened with fear. No, she couldn't be gone! She had to lead him to Jetfur!

His heart pounding, he glanced around, noticing the fox had completely left the log. Nervous and somewhat frustrated, he burst out of the log and glanced around, seeing no fox in sight.

He was about to start screaming for her when he realized that she was probably just out hunting for herself and did not want to disturb Tigerstripe. Still, he didn't feel very relieved to know she was missing, and so he awkwardly wandered around and called for her.

"Um, fox?" he said, wandering around the forest floor near the log where they'd rested for the night. "Are you here?" he called. "Fox?"

A sudden scream caused him to jolt, and he immediately recognized it as the young fox kit's. He spun around, unsure of where the scream had come from. His heart was pounding much faster now, and he realized the kit must be in trouble.

"Fox!" Tigerstripe called nervously. His mind flashed to the devious cobra that had pursued them the day prior, and he shuddered, imagining the sharp teeth enclosing around Jetfur's body in his dream.

"HELP!" came the fox's scream. Tigerstripe recognized that the scream was coming from behind the bushes past the log now, and he quickly leapt into the bushes, the harsh branches tugging against his fur. Still, he continued on until coming out into the opening.

He leapt out of the bushes and landed in a clearing, noticing that the fox lay on her side, knocked out. He glanced around but saw no signs of danger. Whatever had attacked her must've fled.

Unsure if danger was still in the area, Tigerstripe nervously grabbed the unconscious fox kit by the scruff and began dragging her up the nearest tree, relieved to see that her chest was still slowly moving up and down. Still, she did not wake, even when Tigerstripe accidentally knocked her against some nearby branches.

Finally, he found a large branch that could hold both of them, and he set the small furry kit down there, his heart still pounding in fear. This was his one chance to see Jetfur, and now it seemed to have failed again.

"Fox," he muttered, shaking her.

The fox did not budge and remained unresponsive despite Tigerstripe's several attempts to try and wake her. He pushed at her a bit more vigorously each time, but she did not move, only remained limp.

"Uh, fox," he called, shaking her harder. Nothing.

Without warning, something hit Tigerstripe from behind, causing both him and the fox to fall from the tree and land hard on the ground. Tigerstripe yowled as his body collided with the earth, and he groaned upon impact. Slowly, he rose to his feet, his shoulder aching from the fall. The fox, however, was still limp, causing Tigerstripe to become more nervous.

He spun around, wondering what had hit him, when a large hiss came from behind him. Tigerstripe spun around and gasped in fear to see the large cobra from the day before looming over him. Its mouth was wide open, revealing its large teeth that were ready to inject Tigerstripe with poison.

Tigerstripe shut his eyes, wondering if this was the end as the snake zipped forward. Before the snake could deliver its fatal bite, however, a blur of fur hit the evil snake and knocked it away.

Tigerstripe gasped and watched as a tabby cat quickly pinned the snake down and sunk its teeth into the cobra's neck, causing it to go limp in the cat's grasp. As Tigerstripe focused more on the cat, he suddenly noticed the tabby's torn ear. He froze, not believing what he was seeing.

Snakepelt had come to save the day. How she had followed Tigerstripe and had managed to kill the snake was unbelievable. He certainly hadn't ever expected to see her again. In fact, he felt a bit embarassed to admit to himself that he was relieved to see her. After all, she'd just saved his life.

"Why'd you come back?" he asked as Snakepelt left the dead snake on the forest floor.

Snakepelt sat down and calmly licked her paw.

"Oh, please," she murmured. "Like you could survive in this hectic forest."

"We were doing just fine!" Tigerstripe argued, though he knew in his heart this was far from true.

"Say, wasn't there a fox with you?" Snakepelt wondered.

Tigerstripe spun around, noticing the fox was gone. He was sure she had landed on the ground beside him.

"Uh...fox?" he called, glancing around. He stood up, beginning to circle the area.

"Forget about it," Snakepelt told him. "Foxes are no good anyway."

"But this one was just a kit!" Tigerstripe argued, unsure why he was getting so defensive about the fox. Perhaps he truly had grown to care for her in the past few days they'd been together.

Snakepelt eyed him suspiciously. "They grow, you know." She then glanced back at the dead snake and turned back to Tigerstripe. "What's a cobra doing in this forest anyway?"

Tigerstripe shrugged, still glancing around for the fox.

A groan came from the bushes, causing both Snakepelt and Tigerstripe to jump.

"What's that?" Snakepelt asked.

Tigerstripe shrugged, unsure. He watched as Snakepelt approached the bushes, and Tigerstripe followed curiously behind. As Snakepelt pushed the leaves aside, Tigerstripe gasped to see the little fox laying on her side. Obviously she'd been conscious enough to get up and move a few more foxsteps before collapsing again.

"Fox? Are you okay?" Tigerstripe asked, concerned.

Just as he expected, there was no response.

"F-fox," Tigerstripe whimpered, praying to StarClan she had not died. He touched the kit with his paw, slowly moving her leg.

"Don't touch her!" Snakepelt hissed, shoving him aside. She examined the leg carefully, then glanced up. "She's been poisoned."

"Poisoned?" Tigerstripe asked, moving his paw away and licking it. "She's not dead, is she?"

"No, but I doubt she'll be living a few more heart-beats."

"Well, get the poison out!" Tigerstripe shouted, not wanting the fox to die. Not here, not now. "Get some yarrow or something!" He was taking out his frustration of Snakepelt, not that he meant to, but he couldn't allow the fox to die, not when she was supposed to be leading him to Jetfur.

The tabby looked surprised and stared at Tigerstripe with curiousity. "What? It's just a fox. Since when do cats care about foxes?"

"She...saved my life a couple times," Tigerstripe admitted.

"Oh," Snakepelt spoke quietly, turning away. She then turned back to Tigerstripe, sighing. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I can heal it."

"Do you think yarrow works on foxes?" Tigerstripe asked, vaguely remembering the mention of the herb in his camp. Once one of his clanmates had eaten some bad berries, and his medicine cat had successfully gotten the poison out of the cat's body. "It might save her," he explained.

Snakepelt looked a bit confused. "What's yarrow?"

"You've got to be joking!" Tigerstripe exclaimed. As far as he knew, this was a common herb that every medicine cat used. "It's a medicine," he explained. "If you give it to a cat, they throw up. It's good for poisons. If you give some to the fox, she might be able to rid her body of the poison."

"Never heard of it," Snakepelt muttered. "What does it look like?"

Tigerstripe shut his eyes, trying to remember what yarrow had looked like in the forest back home and in the medicine cat den. Suddenly, he caught onto the image.

"They're small flowers," he explained, clearly remembering now. "They come in different colors. We need to look for some," he said, frantically searching the bushes.

Snakepelt quickly fled away, and within a few moments, she emerged with a bunch of flowery plants in her grasp.

"Are these it?"

Tigerstripe glanced at her, shocked she had found them so quickly. He nodded, then continued to explain how to give them to her. He had only been in the medicine cat den a few times, but he'd watched and heard how they would apply certain herbs. He used to hang around there was a young kit when his mother wasn't forcing him to do other tasks. It was a way to escape from reality, he guessed.

"You need the leaves," he told her.

Snakepelt nodded and began to pick the leaves off, Tigerstripe frantically assisting her.

"We just feed this to her?" Snakepelt asked curiously.

Tigerstripe nodded. Snakepelt then stood up and went outside the bush for a few seconds, returning with a large leaf. She pushed the yarrow into the leaf and carried the bundle of leaves over to the dying fox. Tigerstripe watched as Snakepelt forced the young fox kit's jaws open and shoved them down her throat indelicately. She sat down beside Tigerstripe, and both of them waited for some reaction.

"She...she should throw up the poison now," Tigerstripe spoke.

And within a few moments, the fox was up and vomiting. Snakepelt backed away, muttering, "Gross!" as the fox whimpered slightly. Despite the disgusting aspect of the treatment, Tigerstripe was relieved to see it was working.

"She's alive!" Tigerstripe exclaimed as the fox's spewing came to an end.

The little fox tried to stand, her legs shaking vigorously. Too weak, she plopped down to the ground.

"My tummy hurts," she moaned weakly.

Noticing a nearby mouse in the corner, Tigerstripe slashed at it in an instant and brought it to the fox, pushing it toward her.

"Eat this!" he commanded.

The little fox's eyes rolled over to it, and she pushed it away, resting her head back on her paws. Within a few moments, her eyes were closed again.

"No, don't die!" Tigerstripe shouted frantically.

Snakepelt set her tail gently on his shoulder. "Relax," she told him, watching the fox. "She's just sleeping, see?"

Tigerstripe watched and realized she was right. The fox's breathing had picked back up, and her chest slowly rose and fell. He took a deep breath and sighed. It turned out the fox would be okay after all.

Chapter 11

As the fox slept delicately, Tigerstripe relaxed, watching her flank move up and down slowly. He was relieved the fox had recovered, and he wondered if it was more because he cared about the small fox or if he just wanted her help to find Jetfur.

Either way, the fox was alive, and that was what mattered. For a while, both Tigerstripe and Snakepelt just sat there, watching the fox's quiet breaths. She slept so peacefully, as if there were no dangers in the world.

Snakepelt licked her paw delicately beside Tigerstripe but did not make a sound, her eyes still glued to the resting fox. Tigerstripe knew they'd eventually have to leave this clearing and find some place else for shelter, but he decided it was best to just sit here and watch the fox rest for a little while.

As the silence increased between Tigerstripe and Snakepelt, Tigerstripe began to feel awkward, still trying to grasp the idea that Snakepelt had saved both him and the fox's life. He had never really formally thanked her, and he found it too odd to thank her now. He didn't like to rely on others, especially those who had proven him wrong.

"I still need to find Jetfur," he said quietly, his mind now drawn to a different subject. Jetfur was alive, as the fox had said, and she was wandering around somewhere out there. Where, Tigerstripe did not know.

Snakepelt was quiet for a few moments before she responded.

"Tigerstripe," she said, turning to him. Her eyes fixed deep on him, and slowly, she spoke, "I'm coming with you."

Tigerstripe tilted his head, unsure of why she of all cats would want to join him on his quest. Hadn't she been happy in her old clan? She was a warrior! She wasn't a castaway like Tigerstripe.

"Why?" he wondered. "You have a clan."

"I-I can't go back," she whispered, turning away from Tigerstripe. He paused, wondering what had happened to make her feel so strongly toward her clan.

"Why?" he asked.

"Everybody hates me," Snakepelt confessed.

"No they don't!" Tigerstripe sharply replied. He had seen the way Snakepelt had acted as a clan member. She seemed to be a very good warrior. How could all the other cats hate her? Besides, he didn't hate her...at least not anymore anyways.

"*Yes,* they do. I *know* they do," Snakepelt hissed. She then turned away, and glancing at the ground sadly murmured, "It's because I'm different."

"Different?" Tigerstripe asked. "What do you mean? You're a warrior. You're equal to every cat."

Snakepelt shook her head, her eyes still glancing at the ground. She swayed from side to side before looking back up at Tigerstripe, her eyes crystal-like with fresh tears.

"I was taken by two-legs, and they took me to the cutter," she spoke sadly.

Tigerstripe's eyes widened, not expecting a response like that. He had heard little of two-legs and the cutter, but from what he knew, he shuddered. He had heard of kittypets going to the cutter as they got older, but warriors...it seemed like a disgrace.

"Oh," was all he could reply, not sure how to comfort the she-cat.

"I want to help you find Jetfur," Snakepelt repeated once

more, her eyes still focused on the floor. "She was my friend..."

"Okay," Tigerstripe agreed this time, a bit thrilled and relieved to have Snakepelt coming with him. Sure, he and the fox made a great team, but they'd been in so much dangerous situations the past several sunrises.

"We should wait until the fox is better though," Tigerstripe told Snakepelt, his eyes drawn toward the sleeping fox once more. The sun was beginning to set, and its orange hues were cast over the fox's ginger fur.

"Okay," Snakepelt agreed, her gaze focusing back on the fox. She paused for a moment, then turned to Tigerstripe once more.

"So 'Fox' is her name?" Snakepelt asked.

Tigerstripe paused, realizing he had never really asked the fox for her real name. He wasn't even sure if she had a real name. Or if she did, could she only speak it in fox tongue?

"Well, she's never told me her real name," he confessed.

"Oh," Snakepelt replied awkwardly, looking back once more at the young fox kit. Her flank still continued to move up and down, and Tigerstripe knew now for certain she would survive.

"I wonder where her parents are," Snakepelt murmured.

He shrugged. "Beats me. I was hoping they would've come after her a long time ago."

Their conversation fell silent after that, and in the sunset, they watched the fox calmly sleep, finding a bit of serenity and peace in watching her. Tigerstripe began to find himself growing tired, especially as the sky turned from a light orange to a deep indigo. Soon, they were trapped in darkness, despite Tigerstripe's want to find some other means of shelter. Exhausted from a heavy day, he let out a large yawn.

Snakepelt turned to Tigerstripe finally and glanced at him once more.

"Maybe you should rest," she suggested, noticing how tired Tigerstripe seemed to look. He had to admit, he was exhausted. His limbs were sore, his shoulder still hurt, and his eyes were drooping with each moment that passed. "I'll watch the fox," Snakepelt assured him.

Too tired to argue, Tigerstripe slowly laid down and rested his head on his large striped paws, glancing up at the night sky. The stars twinkled brightly, as if StarClan were looking down on them.

StarClan, he thought to himself. *I never really thought of StarClan until now.*

Coming from a vicious clan, his clanmates had been so loyal to the Dark Forest, StarClan had never seemed like it had existed. But now, looking at the great stars, Tigerstripe wondered if perhaps StarClan really was out there, looking out for them.

Slowly, Tigerstripe's eyelids began to droop, and within a few moments, he found himself fast asleep, slowly breathing in and out as he regained his strength for the next day.

"Pssst! Cat! Pssst!" came a sharp whisper in the darkness of the night. Tigerstripe's eyes immediately flung open. He found that the sky was still dark, the stars still shining brightly. As he glanced around, he noticed Snakepelt had finally found sleep too, as she was laying on her side next to the little fox.

As for the fox, she was staring right at Tigerstripe, her eyes wide open. Though he was thrilled to see she was awake and feeling better, he was still exhausted and was not in the mood to speak to her in the middle of the night.

"What?" he mumbled.

"That weird cat," she whispered, glancing over at Snakepelt. "Cat sleep me on," she whispered once more, pointing her nose at Snakepelt. As Tigerstripe stood up slowly, he noticed Snakepelt was partially sleeping on the fox's tail.

"Go back to sleep," he told her, not in the mood to establish

rules about sleeping near each other.

The fox huffed in exasperation. "It hurts! Heavy cat!"

Tigerstripe sighed, too tired to get up and move Snakepelt on his own. He instead glanced at the fox and said once more, "Just try to go back to sleep."

The fox must have sensed the weariness in Tigerstripe's eyes as she sighed and closed her eyes. Tigerstripe glanced at her for a few moments, watching her fall asleep, when her eyes flashed back open once more.

"Cat..."

"Yes?" Tigerstripe asked, wondering what it was she needed now.

"Thanks. Cat life saved me." She closed her eyes once more, and Tigerstripe watched as she slowly fell back asleep, her flank once more moving up and down slowly.

Tigerstripe smiled at her comment, glad that he meant something to her. He wanted to tell her she meant something to him too, but she was already asleep, and he didn't want to trouble her anymore.

With exhaustion taking hold of him once again, he set his head back down on his paws and fell asleep, listening to the quiet sounds of the forest at night.

"TIGERSTRIPE! WAKE UP!" came a startled screech. Tigerstripe's eyes burst open, finding now that it was morning, and sunlight was streaming across the forest floor. He glanced up, noticing Snakepelt glancing at him in bewilderment.

"Huh?" he said, confused on what was going on. She didn't look injured or dying. What was she so upset about?

"THE FOX IS MISSING!"

Chapter 12

"What?!" Tigerstripe exclaimed in surprise. He immediately stood up and glanced around in bewilderment, wondering where the fox could've gone. Oh, what if she'd died? What if she'd run off? The possibilities were endless.

Snakepelt was shaking Tigerstripe roughly, her eyes wide with shock.

"Where is she?!" Tigerstripe demanded.

"It's not here!" Snakepelt cried out, tears gathering in her eyes. He wondered why she was so upset about losing the fox, but he let her continue. "I looked around and it was nowhere to be seen!"

"We just have to keep looking then," Tigerstripe argued, beginning to frantically look around. He sniffed the air, trying to catch any scent of the fox.

Snakepelt immediately followed in his footsteps, and together, they began to sniff around the clearing they had spent the night in, hoping to find some trace of the young fox. Nervousness spread through Tigerstripe like a wildfire, and horrifying thoughts began to circle through his mind as he wondered where the fox was.

"Uh...uh..." Tigerstripe spoke in a panic, continuing to look around. Snakepelt did the same, each of them moving quickly with speed as they frantically searched for some scent.

"Why cat much worry?" came a voice from behind him.

He and Snakepelt whirled around to find the young fox sitting behind them with a dead bird at her feet. Apparently she had decided to find herself some breakfast without telling them.

"Thank StarClan," Tigerstripe breathed in relief, glad to see she was unhurt. It seemed she had completely recovered from her incident the other day as well, which boosted his spirits even more.

The fox tilted her head in confusion, probably wondering why Snakepelt and Tigerstripe had gone into such a state of panic.

"Me hunting was," the little fox exclaimed proudly. She then proceeded to nudge the little dead bird toward Tigerstripe. It seemed she had finally learned to hunt for herself after all.

"No, I can't take this," Tigerstripe said, shoving the bird back to her. "You caught it," he explained. After all, she had finally proved her ability to catch food for herself. He couldn't just very well take what she had worked so hard for. He was sure it must've been quite a challenge to kill the bird.

"But hungry cat," the fox complained.

"You caught it fair and square," Tigerstripe told her once again. "You eat it, and I'll catch something for myself."

Meanwhile, Snakepelt's stomach growled beside him, and Snakepelt glanced at the fox eagerly.

"I'll eat it!" she exclaimed enthusiastically.

The fox kit glanced at the bird, then back at Snakepelt. "Me think right cat. Me get bird, eat bird me."

Tigerstripe watched as Snakepelt frowned. The young fox happily bit into her bird and chewed in satisfaction.

Tigerstripe's whispers twitched in amusement at Snakepelt's disappointment, catching her attention. The striped tabby cuffed Tigerstripe over the ear with her paw, causing Tigerstripe to laugh a bit more.

"Hey, you get your own prey!" he jokingly told her.

Snakepelt laughed a little, and for a moment, there was a brief silence between them where Tigerstripe realized he was

actually grateful for the she-cat's presence. He had enjoyed the fox's company, but she was young and could not speak well. It felt nice to have another cat with him.

"Fine," the tabby she-cat replied, smiling a little. She then padded away from Tigerstripe and the fox in search of breakfast, leaving the two alone again like they'd been so accustomed to being.

By the time Snakepelt had disappeared into the brush, the fox had already eaten the entire bird. Tigerstripe watched as she coughed up a feather and then laughed lightly.

The fox didn't mind him laughing and instead smiled. She then turned to him and asked, "Cat, who other cat?" referring to Snakepelt.

"Her name is Snakepelt," he explained.

"Oh," she said. There was a pause, and then she spoke again. "Did me tell you name me yet?"

He shook his head, unaware the fox actually had a name.

"Rain," she told him.

Tigerstripe grinned, glad to finally be able to identify the fox by a name. It was a beautiful name too, very fitting for the young she-fox.

"Rain," he repeated, liking how it rolled off his tongue. "Cool."

"No one name me," she explained. "Myself me name."

Tigerstripe nodded, wondering when she had decided the name for herself. He liked her choice of name and was impressed with her ability to create a name that translated into cat tongue.

"I see," he said.

"What name is you?" she wondered. "Or 'cat' just it?" she

asked a little jokingly.

Tigerstripe chuckled a bit. "My name is Tigerstripe."

Rain smiled and was about to repeat his name back to him when a scream echoed throughout the woods. Tigerstripe and Rain both leapt into the air and watched as a flock of birds flew from some nearby trees and ascended into the sky.

Tigerstripe froze, wondering where the scream had come from.

"What the..."

The fox shifted her ears and lowered her head. She narrowed her eyes and concentrated deeply. And then, within a flash, she jerked her head up, her eyes wide with fear.

"IT SNAKEPELT SCREAM!" she shouted.

"Oh no," he murmured, the same fear gripping hold of him again. "Rain, come on!" he called, running into the forest in the direction of Snakepelt's scream.

The fox kit ran swiftly after Tigerstripe, and he was surprised to see how fast she could move. Within a few seconds of running, however, she shouted, "WAIT, CAT!"

He froze and then spun around, panting heavily as he faced the fox.

"What is it?" he asked.

"THIS WAY WRONG!" she called. She then flicked her tail in another direction. "Me heard there."

Tigerstripe eyed her with suspicion, sure that he had heard the scream from this direction, but Rain had identified the scream as Snakepelt's, and he knew he could trust her.

"Oops," he murmured, beginning to race after Rain in the opposite direction.

Together, they ran until the sound of voices began to approach them, and they halted to a stop at a clump of green bushes.

"Sh! Cat, listen," Rain whispered.

Tigerstripe held his ear up to the bush, listening for any sound.

"*We* saw it *first.* SO PAW IT OVER, KITTY!" demanded an unfamiliar voice.

Then another voice spoke in a struggling manner.

"N-no! It's—MINE!" Tigerstripe immediately recognized it as Snakepelt's voice, and before he could think, he leapt over the bushes with his claws unsheathed and let out a deep growl.

A huge fox had pinned Snakepelt down. As Tigerstripe glanced at the large fox, he noticed a sharp fang tied to a string hugging the fox's neck. Three other foxes were surrounding her with the same trinkets, their sharp teeth bared.

Then Tigerstripe turned his attention to Snakepelt and found her coat covered in bloody scratches. Though she had a fair number of wounds, her eyes still glowed with battle in them. Within her mouth she held firmly onto a plump bird.

"HEY, STOP!" Tigerstripe hissed.

"Tigerstripe?" Snakepelt gasped in surprise.

The huge fox turned his gaze toward Tigerstripe and laughed. "Oh, so kitty's got a tomfriend, does she?"

Snakepelt hissed at the tom. "THAT'S STUPID! OF COURSE NOT!" though she seemed to be blushing intensely.

The fox tom growled at her, shouting, "Shut up!" Then, he turned his gaze back to Tigerstripe.

"You're going to have to get through me and my brothers

first," he challenged. The three other foxes immediately stepped in front of the larger fox and growled. Tigerstripe turned, wondering why Rain had not helped in.

So much for her help, he thought. The bushes they were hiding behind rattled, but the fox did not appear.

Tigerstripe immediately leapt onto one of the foxes and bit down hard on his ear. The fox yipped in surprise and threw him to the ground. He slapped his paw on Tigerstripe's face and snickered. Tigerstripe, sore now from the impact of falling, growled at the tom. To his left, where he had emerged from, he heard even more rustling in the bushes.

Coming to help, Rain? he wondered.

Breaking free, Tigerstripe hissed in rage and leapt back on the fox. The fox growled, and his trinket suddenly glowed a deep blue. Tigerstripe watched in horror as the fox grew two times his size. He threw Tigerstripe off again, this time a little harder than before. Tigerstripe grunted as he hit the forest floor once again.

"TIGERSTRIPE!" Snakepelt shrieked.

Tigerstripe slowly got back up to his feet, his eyes widening as the fox rushed toward him and bit down hard on his flank. The fox however then stumbled back, growing a bit weary.

"ARE YOU STUPID?!" shouted the leader of the foxes. "DON'T OVERDO IT IN ONE ATTACK!"

He then turned back to Snakepelt and held her tighter. She struggled to be free, but her movements were getting slower and slower, and slowly, her eyes began to close.

Tigerstripe watched in fear as the fox attempted to suffocate Snakepelt, then gasped as Rain burst out of the bushes, running over to the big fox and nipping at his hind leg.

"LET GO!" she barked, but nothing happened.

Tigerstripe then ran to Snakepelt's side and clawed at the

fox's muzzle, growling, "Let go!"

Taken by surprise, the big fox let go of Snakepelt, allowing the tabby to escape from his grasp. He then grabbed the dead bird and bounded off with the others.

The tabby she-cat was lying on the ground, and slowly, she began to lift herself back up, wobbling a little bit until she got her balance.

"Well, that was a stupid fight," Tigerstripe observed.

Snakepelt sighed. "Sorry. I should've just let them take the prey to begin with."

"Well, we should probably head out of here," Tigerstripe suggested. "I don't want to run into those foxes again."

Both Rain and Snakepelt nodded, heading away from the battle they had encountered.

Chapter 13

The two were only walking for a few minutes when Tigerstripe began to a hear a rumbling sound in the distance. He froze, watching as the ground shook beneath him. Both Snakepelt and Rain had paused to, curious at to what the mysterious sound had been.

After the trembling stopped, all three remained quiet for a moment, glancing around in the quiet forest. After a moment, the birds had begun singing again, and the forest came back to life. Tigerstripe tilted his head in confusion. What had been that sound?

"What was that?" Tigerstripe asked after a moment.

Rain crouched down toward the ground and twitched her ears. Meanwhile, Snakepelt stood beside her and stared at her oddly.

"What are you do—" she began to ask.

"SH!" the fox sharply replied. Both Tigerstripe and Snakepelt exchanged and looks and sat in silence as Rain held her ear to the forest floor.

A few heart beats later, she suddenly let out a fierce yip.

"RUN!" she squealed and took off.

Unsure of what to do, Tigerstripe immediately sprinted after Rain and began to follow her, unsure of why she had taken off. Still, she had recognized Snakepelt's scream, which meant she was good at predicting events. Perhaps she truly was saving them from a dangerous situation.

Snakepelt raced after them, and within a few moments, Tigerstripe found the tabby by his side. She was panting heavily, and she looked at Tigerstripe with wild eyes.

"What's the matter?" she asked, her feet racing alongside Tigerstripe's. "Why is everyone running?"

Tigerstripe shrugged, continuing to race after Rain.

"Then what's the point?!" Snakepelt exclaimed. "Are we simply running for fun?!"

Tigerstripe shrugged, still following Rain's ginger bushy tail.

"She senses stuff," he explained to Snakepelt.

"Are you serious?!" Snakepelt exclaimed, chuckling a bit.

Tigerstripe laughed a little and realized this was a bit insane. Why was he chasing after Rain anyway? Did the young fox kit really sense any danger.

"I guess so," he replied to Snakepelt, coming to a halt. Snakepelt stopped beside him, and for a moment, they stood there, catching their breath.

Rain suddenly skidded to a halt in front of them and whirled around. Her eyes were also widened, and she panted, out of breath.

"ARE WHAT DOING YOU?! RUN!"

"But there's nothing here," Tigerstripe argued. "We're perfectly safe. See," he said, pointing to the quiet forest environment. Nothing stirred in the distance, and it seemed all was nice and peaceful. There was no danger in sight.

"LOUD IS IT!" Rain shouted. "CAN HOW NOT HEAR IT?!"

The young fox suddenly bolted to Snakepelt's side and began pushing the gray tabby from behind.

"GO!" she shouted, still furiously shoving Snakepelt forward, obviously desiring for her to run.

Snakepelt, obviously irritated, broke away from the fox and

hissed at her. "There's nothing coming, fox!"

"Rain, I hear nothing," Tigerstripe assured her.

"Oh...so that's your name," Snakepelt said, glancing at the fox. Tigerstripe suddenly realized she'd been absent when they were all introducing each other.

Well, I suppose she knows Rain's name now, he thought.

"CALM, HOW BE CAT?!" she frantically shouted. She began to run in circles and let out a frightening scream, "AHH!"

Tigerstripe winced. "What in StarClan's name is it, Rain?!" he exclaimed.

"WASTING TIME ARE WE!" Rain clamored. "TOO IT LATE!"

Suddenly, the small fox let out a gasp and jumped back. Tigerstripe tilted his head in confusion, then began to hear a faint sound in the distance. He glanced up in the sky, watching as a strange small thing that had the appearance of a rock came soaring down from the sky, exploding where Rain had once been standing.

The explosion sent off a shock, and Tigerstripe was thrown onto the grass. He gasped, his eyes widened. Rain had been correct after all. They really were in danger!

He got to his feet and began to run, watching as Snakepelt slowly recovered from the unexpected explosion.

Another soaring thing flew from the sky and barely missed Snakepelt's face. Instead, it ripped one of her whiskers. She gasped, nearly stumbled, and then took off after Tigerstripe and Rain.

Tigerstripe ran incredibly fast, racing after Rain. Objects were exploding all around them, and it was only a matter of time before one actually hit them.

"RAIN, WHERE CAN WE TAKE COVER?!" he shouted frantically.

"YEAH!" Snakepelt shouted in agreement, running alongside Tigerstripe.

Rain, still running, glanced back at the cats in astonishment.

"CAT KNOW EXPECT ME TO?!" she shouted back.

Tigerstripe's heart sank and then beat even more rapidly. How were they ever going to escape this nightmare?!

Suddenly, one of the objects landed right in front of Tigerstripe. Before he had time to react, it exploded, throwing him into the rock. A moment later, Tigerstripe watched as the world began to fade from his view, trapping him in a world of darkness.

Despite the fact he was unconscious, Tigerstripe could still feel some of the world around him, and he breathed in and out heavily, not seriously injured. He felt the wind ruffle against his pelt, and heard the faint mumble of Snakepelt and Rain and the occasional blast around him.

He at times felt someone pushing against him, and once, he even believed he was being carried by the tail. But perhaps this was all part of a dream, and he was really still lying unconscious near the rock.

Suddenly, all contact with the world seemed to fade, and he opened his eyes to find himself not in the forsaken forest, but instead in a different forest. StarClan.

Tigerstripe glanced around, at first seeking Rain and Snakepelt and the exploding objects, but he realized he was long gone from that forest now. After a few moments, he recognized the sparkling and elegant forest as StarClan, and he prayed he had not died.

"Rain? Snakepelt?" he called, wondering if perhaps they had been brought here too.

Suddenly, a calico she-cat leapt in front of him, screeching, "BOO!"

Tigerstripe shrieked unintentionally and leapt back, pausing for a moment to catch his breath and for his heart beat to die down.

"Who are you?" he asked. The she-cat looked familiar, but he couldn't put the exact name to her face.

"Well, I've already visited you once," the she-cat explained. "Did I tell you my name? I'm pretty sure I did..."

Tigerstripe paused, still unsure how to react to this. He glanced around, then glanced back at the she-cat.

"Um, perhaps I've forgotten," he admitted.

"Daisyflower," she introduced herself again.

Tigerstripe nodded, recognizing the name. Then, his memories flooded back, and he remembered running into the she-cat before.

"Am I dead, Daisyflower?" he asked.

The she-cat chuckled. "Certainly not. This would be a poor welcome into StarClan. Now, I've been wanting to tell you something extremely important. Unfortunately, the last time I met you in your dreams, that cursed fox awoke you."

Tigerstripe raised his eyebrow, unsure if he wanted to hear this important message. He had a feeling that it had to do with nothing good, as most of his dreams didn't seem to predict bright futures.

He then had a sense of hope, wondering if the message were about Jetfur. Perhaps he would be given a clue as to how to find her! He found himself getting excited, and he turned to Daisyflower, holding back a wide smile.

"What is it?" he asked excitedly.

Daisyflower glanced around for a moment, as if she were checking that no one was nearby, and then, she began to speak in a serious voice.

"Grave danger is coming your way. The cat with the snake in her name, you must stay away. For she will be the cause for the falling of the quiet spirit. Listen to her, but you will regret it. Time is breaking apart, and so will your broken heart..." Daisyflower's voice began to fade away, and she began to slowly walk backwards from Tigerstripe, beginning to fade into the darkness.

"What..." Tigerstripe murmured, completely confused. The snake in her name? She wasn't referring to Snakepelt, was she?

"Beware," she mewed quietly and disappeared. The word "beware" seemed to echo through Tigerstripe's mind, and suddenly the snake from his past dream appeared and slithered towards him. Tigerstripe tried to get his legs to move, but they remained frozen.

The snake let out a deathly hiss and then lunged at Tigerstripe. The last thing he saw was the inside of the snake's mouth before he woke up with a startle.

Chapter 14

Tigerstripe awoke with a startle, and for a moment, he glanced around, his heart pounding, wondering where he was. The last he remembered was the bomb exploding and him hitting his head against the rock.

Now, he found himself in a small and dark cave with cold, rocky walls and a hard dirt floor. Outside, a steady rainstorm was occurring, the raindrops hitting against the cave that Tigerstripe had found himself in.

He still could not believe the dream he had just had. Was Daisyflower's warning really the truth? Was Snakepelt really dangerous? His stomach twisted in uneasiness. He knew StarClan would never lie to him, but Snakepelt had been so helpful and so kind to him. He had grown to like the tabby after all. Could he really leave her so easily?

Tigerstripe sat in silence for a few moments, listening to the rain pound against the cave. He couldn't let his affections for Snakepelt get in the way of his affections for Jetfur. Jetfur was still wandering somewhere in the forest, looking for him, he supposed, and if Snakepelt got in the way of that, then he supposed it was best to truly leave her behind. He hadn't known her too long. Perhaps she really was dangerous.

His heart still pounding, Tigerstripe turned to find Rain sleeping. Snakepelt, however, was nowhere to be seen.

Perhaps she's already left, he wondered.

Beside him, Rain suddenly jolted awake and also found herself out of breath. She turned to look at Tigerstripe in fear.

"How me here get?" she whimpered.

"Snakepelt must've brought us here," he explained. He paused, then turned at Rain and glanced at her with all seriousness.

"Rain, we must leave immediately," he ordered.

Rain shrunk down, her eye catching his.

"W-Why?" she whimpered, clearly not agreeing with his plan.

Tigerstripe glanced around, making sure that Snakepelt was nowhere nearby. The last thing he needed was Snakepelt walking in on them just as he was planning their escape.

"When I was hit by that bomb, I had a dream," he began. "I dreamt I was in StarClan, and a StarClan cat came to me and told me to beware the cat with the snake in her name. Snakepelt, obviously. I know I haven't been very loyal to StarClan in the past, but I trust them, and I know they were telling the truth. Snakepelt can no longer be trusted."

Rain glanced at him in shock, unable to speak.

"Now get up," he hissed quietly. "Let's go."

Rain's eyes widened only further, and she remained put.

"But, friend Snakepelt is!" she argued. "Could be Snakepelt not in dream!"

Just as those words slipped past her mouth, a mew came from outside of the cave. Tigerstripe spun around and found Snakepelt standing at the entrance of the cave. Her fur was dripping wet with rain, and damp leaves clung to her fur. Her feet, meanwhile, were stained with mud. In an innocent manner, she glanced at the two in confusion.

Tigerstripe sighed. Right now, Snakepelt did not seem to be of any danger, but he had to follow his instincts and heed StarClan's warning. She was not a cat to be trusted and could endanger his quest.

"I-Is everything okay?" she wondered. Tigerstripe noticed from her frantic vibrations that she was shivering from the cold rain.

Tigerstripe opened his mouth to speak, but Rain cut him off.

"All good is," Rain replied. "For bringing here us thank you," she continued.

"Um...yeah," Tigerstripe muttered.

"I'm glad you're okay, Tigerstripe," Snakepelt said, approaching him. "I was really worried that bomb had killed you."

He tried to look away, but he caught her eyes for a second and in them noticed such sweetness and sincerity. Could this cat really be evil?

No, I must trust StarClan, he reminded himself.

When Tigerstripe did not reply to Snakepelt's comment, she raised an eyebrow and glanced at him.

"Is everything okay?" she asked again.

Getting up as much courage as he could, he turned and faced her, staring directly into her eyes. Though they were gentle, he reminded himself of the evil this cat possessed, and that gave him the fortitude to speak to her.

"Snakepelt, I am leaving," he said, pausing after a moment. Her eyes widened in shock, but before she could reply, Tigerstripe continued.

"I will be leaving *without* you. I-I received a message from StarClan in a dream claiming you were not to be trusted. I don't know if Rain will come with me," he said, turning his head to look at the young fox, "but it is best you head home to your clan. I don't need you anymore," he finished boldly.

Before she could react, he strode past her outside where the rain was still falling, but in a more gentle manner now. Still, the sky

was streaked with clouds of gray, and a rapid wind pounded against his pelt.

Not a moment too soon, the tabby raced after him outside of the cave, her eyes crystallized with tears. She, herself, looked completely shocked, obviously not seeing this outcome ever coming.

"What? Why?" she demanded. She was beginning to sob now, and Tigerstipe slowly felt his heart breaking. He didn't want to leave her behind, but he had to listen to StarClan and to his heart. Still, why didn't it feel right?

"Tigerstripe, why would they say to stay away from me?" she begged, tears streaming down her face, already wet from the rain. "Did I do something wrong? What did I do to you? I'm sorry for whatever I may have done!"

Tigerstripe paused for a moment and stared at her, unsure of what to say. He too felt tears beginning to fill his eyes, and his throat was suddenly very chalky.

"You have done nothing wrong," he assured her in a gentle manner. "It-it has been nothing but a delight to have you here with me."

Get on with it, Tigerstripe, he told himself, realizing he was giving her too much hope.

"I was, however, told not to talk to you, or I would regret it dreadfully. Good-bye, Snakepelt," he said once again, brushing past her in the same manner. He hoped she could not see how red his eyes were with tears.

Hearing footsteps, Tigerstripe turned quickly to see Rain bounding out of the cave and rushing toward Tigerstripe's side. He wasn't exactly sure where he was going, but in a moment, the fox was by his side, and he felt that he now had some sense of direction.

But Snakepelt was not finished with him, for he heard her

frantic footsteps. In a moment, she had caught up to them and stopped in front of Tigerstripe and Rain, causing the two to come to a halt. She glanced at them, heartbroken and confused.

"Tigerstripe, look at me," she begged.

Tigerstripe, who had been glancing down, took a deep breath and stared at her. She obviously was in much pain, and he immediately wanted to look away. But he held his gaze and waited for her to continue.

"Tell me if you think I could do anything wrong to hurt you," she spoke softly.

You would never hurt me, he thought to himself, and for a moment, he believed himself too. But then he thought of Jetfur and StarClan, and his mind was set on that again.

"I'm sorry," he spoke firmly, "but I must listen to StarClan." And with those words, he walked past her a third time, Rain reluctantly following behind.

He watched as Snakepelt's tail drooped as he passed by, and not a moment later, he heard her angry hiss sounding from behind him.

"FINE! LISTEN TO YOUR STUPID DREAMS!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. "I DON'T NEED YOU OR ANYONE!"

And with those words, he heard her footsteps crashing on the wet ground again. Sighing, he turned around to see that she was fleeing in the opposite direction. Rain came to a halt, and together, they watched as she faded from their view.

It is for the best, Tigerstripe told himself. But why did he suddenly feel so empty inside?

Tigerstripe then turned to Rain. Though Snakepelt had faded from their view, she was still glancing in the direction the she-cat had taken off in, as if she were hoping for the gray tabby with the torn ear to return.

"Are you coming with me?" he asked, interrupting her concentrated stare.

Rain glanced at Tigerstripe, then looked away.

"Tigerstripe," she spoke softly. "On her bit hard don't think you? Nothing dreamt meant what if? Head in formed what if? She life saved all after."

Tigerstripe knew Rain had a valid point, and in his mind, it also seemed so wrong. Why had StarClan made him drive away a cat that had been so kind to him? Did she really possess the evil that Daisyflower had described?

"I'm sorry," he told her, "But the dream was real. I must listen to StarClan."

Rain sighed, and a moment later, she was back on her feet, following Tigerstripe deeper into the forest.

As they slowly made their way farther away from the cave, Tigerstripe glanced back one last time, almost hoping to see Snakepelt. What he saw was nothing, and he continued on his way, his mind now focused on one thing—finding Jetfur.

Chapter 15

For several sunrises now Tigerstripe and Rain had continued their search for Jetfur with little luck. After leaving Snakepelt, they had traveled deeper into the forest, trying to locate where Rain's den had been the night of the storm in hopes that Jetfur might still be in the area.

But as the days passed, Tigerstripe began to suspect more and more that they would find no trace of his black-furred friend and that any scents of her would now have been washed away by rain or other animals.

The first few days after leaving Snakepelt had been a bit awkward for both Tigerstripe and Rain. He knew the fox had enjoyed Snakepelt's company and did not suspect the torn-eared tabby of doing any evil. Tigerstripe secretly believed this too, but he knew that StarClan had warned him for a reason and that it would be wise to heed Daisyflower's warning.

Still, mostly silence existed between Rain and Tigerstripe those first few days. He knew the young fox was frustrated with him for leaving Snakepelt behind, but she was obviously more loyal to Tigerstripe than to Snakepelt and continued to stay by his side.

The first few nights, Tigerstripe feared that when he awoke, Rain would be gone, but the loyal fox remained, even if she wasn't on the best standing with Tigerstripe. She had agreed to attempt to lead Tigerstripe back to her den though, and that pleased him some.

Snakepelt was not mentioned between them during this time. The subject was too painful and awkward to discuss, and Tigerstripe found it better to just forget the fact that the she-cat had been around at all. Still though, he often thought of her and wondered how she was doing, if she had returned to her clan, and if her life had improved.

He hadn't meant to ever assume feelings for the tabby, but

she had been so kind and likeable, that he couldn't resist. Unfortunately, he always had to push these positive feelings away whenever he thought of her, remembering StarClan's warning and that Jetfur was his new goal now.

Snakepelt never came after them even if Tigerstripe had suspected she would. In fact, he sometimes hoped she'd appear and in a sarcastic tone inquire whether they believed they could survive in the forest alone.

Tigerstripe always smiled a little thinking about this. And he and Rain had come across very little danger since they had departed from the she-cat, yet he knew it might take a while before he was finally able to clear his mind of her.

One morning, nearly fifteen sunrises after leaving Snakepelt, Tigerstripe awoke to find sunlight streaming across his dark striped pelt. He slowly opened his eyes and turned to his side, noticing that Rain was still curled up beside him.

He realized while glancing at the fox that she had grown some since he had first found her. She was still not his size completely, but she was coming close. It would be a matter of time before she towered over the tom.

Though Rain assured Tigerstripe she had been leading him to her former den, he had begun to question her. They'd been journeying so long now, he wondered if she even knew which direction they were going in. He didn't mean to act impatient, but he was beginning to doubt his fox friend.

"Rain, Rain," he quietly muttered, shoving her slightly.

The fox's eyes opened, and she let out a large yawn and rose to her feet, stretching her slight ginger paws. She turned and faced Tigerstripe, smiling weakly.

"Morning good, Tigerstripe," she said.

Tigerstripe smiled back in return and rose to his feet, stretching in the same manner that Rain had. His stomach let out a

large growl, and he turned, looking at Rain.

"How about we catch some breakfast?" she suggested.

Rain nodded, and together, they went farther into the woods, seeking a morning meal. Within several minutes of hunting, both of them had come out successful, Tigerstripe managing to catch a robin, and Rain able to capture a squirrel.

Under the shade of a nearby pine tree, they ate at their meal until Tigerstripe was satisfied. After he had finished his robin, he watched as Rain nibbled the meat off the squirrel until the bones were licked clean.

As she ate, he noticed how sharp her teeth were, and he shuddered, wondering, if at any point, the fox may take on her natural born instincts and become an enemy of Tigerstripe. She was growing fast, and some day, she might find the familiar tension between a fox and cat growing on her.

"Why looking me at cat?" she asked.

Tigerstripe shook his head.

"Nothing," he replied. "How about we get going?"

Rain nodded, and together, they rose, wandering farther into the woods. Tigerstripe trotted alongside the fox, glancing around at woods before him. He wondered what his life would've been like if MoonClan had not failed. Would he still manage to befriend Jetfur? Would his life be normal?

He shook his head, knowing it was not good to dwell on the past. Besides, he'd have never been able to meet Snakepelt and Rain if he had not left his clan.

Don't think about Snakepelt, he told himself, shaking his head again.

"We are going to your den, right?" Tigerstripe asked Rain.

"Yes," Rain replied, walking with confidence.

"No offense, but you've been saying that for days, and I don't find we're getting any closer to your den," Tigerstripe spoke with a bit of annoyance in his voice.

Rain ignored him and crawled through some bushes. Tigerstripe, becoming increasingly annoyed, followed after her.

"Hey, I asked you a question!" he growled.

"Den this is, Tigerstripe," she muttered, pointing to a small burrow up against a rocky hillside. Tigerstripe froze, wanting to shout in joy. They had finally reached her den! Maybe now he'd find Jetfur.

Without even thinking about thanking the fox, he began to sniff the air and began shouting, "JETFUR! JETFUR!"

"Tigerstripe," Rain said, but Tigerstripe ignored her.

"JETFUR! JETFUR!" he called again. He glanced inside Rain's burrow but found it completely empty. He sniffed inside, but all scents had vanished.

"Gone scent is," Rain sighed.

"Do you think she's still in the area?" Tigerstripe asked.

Rain shrugged.

"Sniff for her scent!" Tigerstripe commanded, not meaning to be harsh toward the fox, but also at the same time desperately wanting to find his friend.

Together, Tigerstripe and Rain ran their noses across the ground, though the only scents Tigerstripe could detect were faint and stale, belonging to rabbits or mice perhaps.

"Smell anything?" he asked Rain.

Rain shook her head and continued sniffing.

Becoming desperate, Tigerstripe began straying farther from

Rain's home, hoping that he'd find Jetfur somewhere. He began calling to her again, but only the wind answered his responses. He felt his heart sinking deeper and deeper, and he began to wonder if he'd ever see the black she-cat again.

Tigerstripe continued searching for the remainder of the morning and into the afternoon, Rain following behind. She did not search or sniff the air with the same determination that Tigerstripe did, however, and after many hours, it seemed she was getting rather bored and exhausted with searching.

"Tigerstripe," she called.

Tigerstripe spun around angrily, facing the fox.

"What?!"

Rain's eyes widened, and she froze, taken aback. Then, she calmed down and began to speak in a peaceful manner.

"Perhaps good idea not is," she suggested. "Since too long Jetfur here. Find we scent no."

Tigerstripe sighed, knowing that the fox was right, but he didn't want to give up his search. It just seemed so unfair that each time he seemed a little bit closer, he was in actuality so much farther.

"Maybe help Snakepelt could," she continued.

"No!" Tigerstripe hissed.

For a moment, he and Rain just stood there, the wind ruffling through their pelts. They held each other's gaze in silence for a few moments, and then Rain sighed.

"Tired me is. Me den go back. Follow you will?"

Tigerstripe sighed. "Just a few more minutes. And then I'll come back, I promise."

Rain sighed and sadly nodded her head. She turned and

began heading back to the burrow she had once occupied while Tigerstripe continued to scour the ground. He knew it was useless to continue searching for Jetfur, but he just had to try.

And he continued to search until the sky became dark, and he was forced to admit that Jetfur really was nowhere in the area. He sighed, knowing now they'd have to keep searching other places and were at the start again.

Disappointed, Tigerstripe slowly made his way back to the burrow, his tail drooped between his legs. As he approached, he found Rain already curled up inside, sleeping soundly. Tigerstripe sighed, glad to have someone as loyal as her with him. She had done her job, though he hoped she would remain with him as he continued searching.

Crawling inside, he settled down next to her and rested his head on his paws.

"Worry don't, Tigerstripe," she said quietly, causing him to jump. He had assumed that the fox had been completely asleep.

"Find Jetfur we will," she spoke again.

Tigerstripe sighed and closed his eyes, slowly drifting off to sleep.

Chapter 16

Tigerstripe awoke the following morning curled up against Rain's thick ginger coat. Sunlight had drifted into Rain's burrow, and Tigerstripe shielded his eyes in annoyance, not yet wanting to get up. Beginning a new day meant another day of disappointment, and he was still utterly disappointed that they had found no trace of Jetfur the day before.

Rain stirred beside Tigerstripe and began to move, standing up and stretching. The sun's rays were exposed more now on Tigerstripe, and he groaned in exasperation.

"Upset why, Tigerstripe?" Rain inquired.

"I don't want to get up," he grumbled, refusing to move his limbs.

"New day is!" Rain exclaimed. "Remember Jetfur find?"

Tigerstripe sighed and opened his eyes, his gaze falling on the young fox. Her eyes shone with innocence, and he wondered how she could ever be filled with so much hope.

"Give up don't," Rain warned.

"I'm tired of being disappointed!" Tigerstripe exclaimed, now fully awake. He stood up and shook off his pelt, growling in annoyance. All he yearned for was to see his dear friend Jetfur again, but now, he was not even sure if that would come true.

Rain only sighed and shook her head.

"Food some let's get," she offered. "Better feel you will."

Tigerstripe wasn't in the mood for breakfast, but he followed Rain anyway out into the forest. The fox fearlessly led the way, searching for any scent of fresh breakfast. Tigerstripe meanwhile lingered behind and sulked.

Though he was trying to remain angry, at the sight of a mouse, he realized how hungry he actually was, and by instinct he crouched down. Rain turned, noticing that he had caught sight of the mouse, and continued to let him hunt for his breakfast.

Tigerstripe stealthily stalked the mouse on the forest floor and leapt just as the mouse turned its head. Unfortunately, the mouse was too late, and within seconds, it was encased in Tigerstripe's claws. He killed it with a simple bite and smiled weakly, proudly showing off his prey.

"Catch good!" Rain encouraged.

"Thanks," Tigerstripe replied, feeling a little better. He refused to eat his breakfast, however, until Rain had caught her share of food. And it wasn't long. The fox had definitely improved in her hunting since joining Tigerstripe, and within minutes, she had a full-grown rabbit hanging from her jaws.

Now with both of them having caught breakfast, they laid down in the quiet forest and bit into their meals. Tigerstripe quickly wolfed down his mouse and soon felt energy returning to him. The previous day had exhausted him, and he now felt ready to take on the day again.

Rain was still nibbling at her rabbit, and he glanced at her with curiosity. He wondered why she had gone through so much for him, why she continued to stand by him, and why she hadn't left.

"Wrong is something?" she asked, noticing Tigerstripe staring at her again.

"No," Tigerstripe quickly replied. He glanced down at his striped paws and then glanced back up, locking eyes with the fox.

"It's just, I don't understand why you're still here. You could've left long ago, but you stayed. And I assumed you'd leave once we returned home. You don't have to stay with me, you know," Tigerstripe told her. "I'm not exactly embarking on an easy mission."

Rain chuckled slightly.

"Tigerstripe friend is," she explained. "Leave friends do not. I Jetfur to find want too."

"Are you sure?" Tigerstripe asked. "What about your family? Aren't they worried?"

Rain only shook her friend. "Have family none. Tigerstripe family closest thing is."

Tigerstripe felt oddly touched. He quickly shook this feeling away, feeling like a soft-hearted kittypet and not a tough and vicious MoonClan warrior.

"If you don't mind me asking, how did you even learn to speak cat?" he asked.

"Like before said, me family have none. Fox old me in took. He fluent cat in. Some taught me before separated got we. Hard working I have been. Fluent someday I want."

Tigerstripe smiled weakly. "Well, keep working on it. Maybe you will be fluent someday. Maybe you'll find that fox again and he can help you even more."

"Think so you?" Rain asked excitedly.

"If I can find Jetfur, I bet you can find that fox," he offered.

Rain smiled and finished the rest of her meal, leaving nothing but pale bones stripped clean of all flesh and blood.

"The problem is," Tigerstripe said as he and Rain both rose to their feet to once again begin their journey, "is that I don't know where to start looking for Jetfur. Snakepelt was only a friend, and we found no signs of her here."

"To that forest Jetfur went," Rain told him, pointing off to the northeast where tall trees rose from the ground. "Look there we can."

"Good idea," Tigerstripe replied. "Though we don't know her exact location, we can at least follow in her footsteps and hope to find

some clues along the way. Thanks, Rain."

"Welcome your," she replied happily.

Together, they made their way toward the other part of the forest. Though there was no guarantee Jetfur was nearby, Tigerstripe was excited to follow where she had gone and desperately hoped that they'd find some clue that she was nearby.

Dear StarClan, help me find her, he thought to himself, gazing at the sky for a few moments as if he were speaking to StarClan directly.

They walked in silence for quite a while, keeping their noses lifted high in the air in case they smelled Jetfur or another unfamiliar scent. Tigerstripe's thoughts, however, kept drifting back to Snakepelt. He hadn't meant for her to invade his mind, but he still worried for her and wondered if she'd ever gotten back to her clan. And if she had, were the cats treating her any better? It wasn't fair what had happened to her, and she still acted like a warrior. She'd saved Tigerstripe and Rain multiple times.

Tigerstripe knew Rain missed Snakepelt too, but he had to keep reminding himself of StarClan's warning. It just seemed so out of place, and he wondered if perhaps he was too quick to judge others. Perhaps Snakepelt had only been pretending to act nice. Perhaps she'd done something terrible in her clan and had made up the whole story that she'd left because no one liked her.

Tired of thinking of Snakepelt, Tigerstripe tried harder to erase the brown tabby with the torn ear from his memory. Instead, he focused on Jetfur, remembering her slick black pelt and sparkling eyes. Would she be excited to see him again? He hoped so. But what if she didn't want to see him again? What if the time they'd spent together had been easily forgotten? Tigerstripe now felt a new sense of anxiety.

"Okay you?" Rain wondered, noticing Tigerstripe's change in expression.

"Fine," Tigerstripe lied, continuing to walk through the forest.

Rain did not question him any further, and for the remainder of the day, they continued their trek through the forest, occasionally stopping for a drink of water or for something to eat. But mostly, their feet carried them across the forest floor, and they were introduced to a new forest.
There was mostly silence existing between Rain and Tigerstripe throughout the day. Occasionally, they would speak, but it was mostly about whether a break was needed or if they were admiring a particular view.

Tigerstripe wasn't exactly sure what to discuss with the fox. She could not speak his language well, and he wasn't entirely sure what a fox and cat had in common. In fact, they practically had nothing in common since foxes were normally the enemies of cats. Tigerstripe still felt a bit nervous as he thought of Rain growing into a full size fox. But she had claimed Tigerstripe was his closest friend, and that was enough to calm his fears for now.

As the day carried on, it soon began to get dark, and both Rain and Tigerstripe glanced around for some form of shelter. A wind had begun to pick up, and it blew against both of their pelts, causing Tigerstripe to shiver slightly.

Finally, he found a small cave situated by a nearby river. He led Rain inside, and once they had checked that no other animal was occupying it, they decided that it would be a perfect place to remain for the night.

Though it was dark, Tigerstripe still was not tired enough to go to sleep, and so he worked to gather some moss for him and Rain to sleep on as opposed to the cold cave floor.

"Thanks much," Rain said as Tigerstripe handed her some moss. She carefully placed it underneath her and laid down happily.

Tigerstripe, in the same fashion, laid out his moss and did his best to create some type of nest similar to the one he slept on back in MoonClan. He laid down on his and glanced at Rain.

"Say," he said, capturing her attention. "Why did you name yourself 'Rain'?" he wondered.

"Huh?" Rain responded.

"When you told me your name, you said you had given yourself your own name. So why 'Rain'?"

"First learned word in cat," she explained. "Teaching me fox was, and falling down was rain." She paused, for a moment, trying to find the right word. "First time for me clicked. Shouted I happily 'rain' when word learned. Proud teacher was. Then decided me to call Rain myself in cat."

"Fascinating," Tigerstripe replied, imagining a young Rain prancing around in a storm and shouting her name. He wondered how young she was when the fox had taken her in, as she'd been fairly young when Tigerstripe had found her.

He felt, however, that he'd asked enough questions about her personal life for the day, and so content, on going to sleep, he laid down and rested his head on his paws, slowly falling to sleep and dreaming of the day when he and Jetfur might be reunited again.

Chapter 17

Another half moon had passed since Tigerstripe and Rain had embarked on their journey once again, and after another half moon, they had no success and were no closer to finding Jetfur than they had before. Though they had followed her footsteps, it had led them nowhere, and Tigerstripe was beginning to doubt himself again.

Snakepelt, meanwhile, continued to creep into his mind when he was in doubt, and at times if he wondered if it truly had been the right decision to expel her from their traveling group. But she was the only snake-named cat he knew, so it had to be her. He often reminded himself of this.

On a particularly blustery day, Tigerstripe and Rain were padding through the forest, the wild wind ruffling at their pelts. Tigerstripe shivered some and hoped that Jetfur wasn't suffering from this windy evening.

Tigerstripe and Rain had been traveling all day, mostly in silence, and through the harsh wind, it was hard to keep a conversation when they were trying so hard not to be thrown off their feet by the harsh blasts.

Rain, however, came to a stop for a second, causing Tigerstripe to halt near her. He paused for a moment, wondering why she had halted.

"Cat, Jetfur what is like?" she asked.

"Well, she has jet black fur," Tigerstripe began, Jetfur's image slowly forming in his mind. He thought of the few moments they had spent together, yet his memory of her was so vivid and lively.

"She has these bright green eyes. She's very kind, thoughtful, sweet,

and..." He paused, not sure where he was going. He assumed Rain had just asked for a physical description, not her characteristics. Besides, what rant was he even about to go off on? He and Jetfur were only friends as far as he knew. They hadn't even known each other that long when they'd become separated.

Tigerstripe coughed, breaking up his awkward train of thought.

"Like I said," he continued. "She has jet black fur. She'd be pretty easy to spot."

"Oh," Rain said, glancing down at her paws for a second as more wind brushed against her. "Jetfur best is Tigerstripe's friend?"

Tigerstripe paused for a moment, then nodded. Why did best friend not feel like the appropriate term though? He felt like she should be something more to him.

Rain opened her mouth, looking as if she was about to say something, then shut it again. Taking a deep breath, she began walking against the wind again, Tigerstripe doing the same. He padded alongside her, wondering what she was thinking about.

Rain also seemed to be deep in thought, though she spoke no words. Tigerstripe eyed her for a minute, then spoke.

"If you're thinking about Snakepelt," he began, "Then stop. I don't need her help...I can find Jetfur on my own."

Whether or not Rain was actually thinking this, Tigerstripe sure was, and he let his feelings slide out easily. Rain glanced at him for a moment, then sighed.

"That's what think you Tigerstripe, but know you heart in your...you do."

"I don't need her!" he growled angrily, picking up his pace. Rain picked up hers too and trotted along beside him, sighing once more.

Up ahead, the sky was beginning to get dark, and the temperature

was dropping with each passing second. Tigerstripe soon found himself beginning to shiver, and when he glanced over at Rain, he noticed her tiny ginger hairs were standing on end as she shivered too.

"Let's find a place to sleep," Tigerstripe suggested.

Rain nodded her head vigorously, and together, they began to look around. Unfortunately, they seemed to have no luck. As the sun continued to set and the air got colder, Tigerstripe could find no traces of shelter, not even a rock they could lounge under to protect them slightly from the wind.

Then, an idea hit him. Why not build a burrow?

Tigerstripe paused by some fresh soil and began to dig. Rain watched him with curiosity but did not speak.

"I'm making a burrow," he explained. "I've seen foxes do this."

Rain nodded, though she didn't seem too pleased by his burrow.

Tigerstripe continued digging until the hole expanded to the right size. When he was sure it could fit both him and Rain, he squeezed inside and was immediately free from the icy winds. He glanced outside at Rain and motioned for her to enter.

Rain seemed displeased though, and she only stared at the hole.

"Well, come on," Tigerstripe ordered, getting a bit annoyed.

"Me go hole not," she said plainly.

"Well, if you want to freeze, be my guest," he grunted, curling up inside the burrow he had created.

Rain glanced at him for a second then curled up outside the tunnel. Tigerstripe sighed, hoping she wouldn't be too cold, and then he shut his eyes, comfortable with no wind blowing against his pelt.

During the middle of the night, Tigerstripe awoke. The wind had died down some but was still going, and though it did not blow against him, the noise kept him awake. He sighed and let stressful thoughts begin to enter his brain.

As he lay there, desperately trying to fall back asleep, he thought if he would ever see Jetfur's face again. He imagined her now, so thrilled to see him. They would be reunited at last, and nothing would ever separate them again.

But then he thought of all the mishaps he had gotten into since his search had begun and how they had made little to no progress their enter time searching. He began to get frustrated and tossed around angrily, unable to sleep.

What if he never saw Jetfur again? What if he wasted his life away searching for her? Nothing was going right, and he was tired of it.

Needing some fresh air, Tigerstripe crept out of the burrow, a light wind blowing against his striped pelt. Rain was curled up and fast asleep near the burrow, her chest rising and falling slowly.

Tigerstripe slowly crept past his friend and then sprinted off into the forest, desperately hoping to find Jetfur. He came to a halt after sprinting a bit and then glanced around as the wind blew against him.

"JETFUR!" he yowled, praying to StarClan there would be some response. "JETFUR!"

The only response was the wind howling. He sighed and sat down, twisting his paws in the dirt. Why couldn't he find Jetfur? Why wouldn't she ever reply? When would he ever be able to find her?

Tigerstripe unsheathed his claws and sunk them in the dirt, thoroughly frustrated. He stood up and began shouting again, praying again for another response.

"JETFUR, PLEASE ANSWER ME!" he shouted with all his might. His voice echoed throughout the forest, though it seemed to be lost in the howling wind. Tigerstripe sighed and sat back down,

disappointed. He glanced down at his paws and sighed, disappointment flooding through him.
Then, he heard something. It sounded like a whisper, a voice almost. Tigerstripe stood up and pricked his ears, trying to make out whatever he had heard through the howling wind.

"Come here..." came a whisper, one that sounded as if it belonged to a she-cat. It was impossible to tell if it was Jetfur or not, but Tigerstripe was taking no chances. He couldn't have iamgined that voice. Perhaps Jetfur was right here, waiting for him.

"JETFUR!" he shouted, beginning to sprint in the direction where he had heard the sweet calling voice. He ran quickly, trying to figure out where the voice had come from, but once again, he heard nothing.

He came to a halt and began wandering around the area once more, keeping his ears pricked against the wind storm.

"JETFUR!" he called again, hoping he'd receive another response. He was beginning to pick up an odd scent, though with all the wind, it was impossible to tell what it was or how far away it was.

"Closer," the voice whispered again.
Tigerstripe approached closer to where the voice was coming from, glancing around for a jet black she-cat. Still, he saw nothing in his pathway and wondered where the voice even was coming from.

The voice, still whispering slightly, though Tigerstripe couldn't make out the words, stopped, and Tigerstripe halted as well.

"Jetfur?" he asked.

The entire forest was quiet, and Tigerstripe glanced around, looking for his friend. Suddenly, the silence was broken by a large bang, and Tigerstripe shrieked as a soaring thing missed him by a whisker.

Tigerstripe gasped and began to run away from whatever had come at him. Unfortunately, he didn't seem to be fast enough as he noticed two large figures on either side of him approaching, and

they were most definitely not Jetfur. One lifted him up, and he yowled in surprise, struggling to free himself from the grip of the two-leg.

The other smaller two-leg murmured something to the one holding Tigerstripe, and a moment later, he brought out a small crate and set it on the ground. The older one holding Tigerstripe opened the cage with one hand and tossed him inside.

Tigerstripe yowled as he was thrown against the metal bars of the small crate, and he fled toward the door right as the two-leg holding him shut the door and locked it.

Tigerstripe gasped, unsure of what to do. For now, he was trapped inside a two-leg cage with no hope of escaping.

Chapter 18

For a moment, Tigerstripe was frozen in fear, unsure of what to do. He had willingly fallen into the trap of the two-legs, and now, he was stuck in a metal cage with no way out. Soon, his adrenaline kicked in, and he realized he couldn't stay here locked up in this cage.

Tigerstripe let out a fierce hiss and clawed at the cage with his sharp claws, but the metal bars would not give way. His claws barely even left any marks on the metal bars. Becoming more frustrated, he writhed around yowling in frustration, frantically trying to escape. He sounded like a cat gone mad.

I have to find Jetfur. I need to break free, he told himself over and over, using all his might to try to break through the cage. Unfortunately, he was having no success whatsoever.

The younger two-leg began to chuckle as Tigerstripe struggled, and Tigerstripe turned his eyes on the young two-leg and growled fiercely. The older one then turned and slapped the younger in the face, barking a command at him.

Tigerstripe then froze in fear and calmed his screeching as the younger one approached and picked up his cage by the handlebar located on top. Soon, Tigerstripe had been lifted on the ground and watched as the forest floor moved beneath him.

He yowled in surprise, once again clawing at the cage. The two-legs were taking him away from the forest! He had to escape!

Using all his might, Tigerstripe pushed his muscular body against the cage, knocking it out of the younger two-legs' hands. The cage fell on its side, and the door burst open, giving enough room for Tigerstripe to escape.

He quickly squeezed through the small opening and found himself

free. He grinned in success, then watched in horror as the two-legs yelled in anger. Soon enough, the younger two-leg was rushing after him.

Fast on his paws, Tigerstripe darted around the area where he had escaped, laughing slightly as the young two-leg struggled to catch up to him. Meanwhile, the older one was going through one of his bags, struggling to retrieve something.

Tigerstripe paid no attention to him, however, and darted in between the younger two-legs' legs, watching as he fell to the ground in confusion. Tigerstripe laughed, then froze as he noticed a thin object that resembled a stick in the older two-leg's hands.

Tigerstripe kept on running, though he kept his eye on the older as he grabbed something that appeared to look like rocks and slipped it inside the odd device. Tigerstripe tilted his head, unsure of the device and not sure what it did when the two-leg aimed the stick at him.

A sudden boom echoed as the device went off. Tigerstripe let out a yowl as whatever the two-leg had placed in the device scratched against his shoulder. Though the rock-like object had not been implanted inside him, it had wounded his shoulder.

Tigerstripe let out a yowl in pain, watching as blood began to seep into his fur. He fell to the ground and yowled as the two-legs quickly retrieved him from the ground and stuck him back in the cage.

Tigerstripe furiously tried to claw at them, but his shoulder ached, and he was unsuccessful. He listened as the two-legs yelled at each other angrily though Tigerstripe was unsure why. Wasn't the goal to try to kill him?

Tigerstripe turned and licked his wound, wincing as it stung. Though the wound was not bad, he needed to get it treated, or it might get infected. But how could the two-legs ever help him? They were trying to kill him in the first place, weren't they?

He laid down in the cage, giving up all means of escape. He sighed

and rested his head on his paws, ignoring the searing pain in his shoulder.

"Jetfur, where are you?" he mumbled, glancing around the forest through the metal bars of his cage.

The older one retrieved his stick-like device again and pointed it at Tigerstripe. Tigerstripe froze but knew there was no escape this time. The two-leg was going to shoot him, and this time, he would not miss.

"HEIGHHH!" A weird sound echoed throughout the forest, and Tigerstripe froze, glancing around. The two-leg with the stick-like weapon did the same.

Suddenly, a blur of orange fur leapt out of the bushes. Tigerstripe gasped, realizing it was Rain who had made that odd sound. She had come to save Tigerstripe!

She fluffed out her fur and let out a deafening screech. The two-leg turned his weapon from Tigerstripe to the fox and aimed at her instead. In a flash, Rain bit down on the stick and growled intensely. With her muzzle she pointed it upwards, and a soaring object hit the tree rather than her.

"Rain! You came back!" Tigerstripe called excitedly, never so glad to see the fox before.
Rain ignored him and instead tried to yank the weapon out of the two-leg's hands. Tigerstripe watched as the two engaged in a tug-of-war, each furiously trying to succeed. Meanwhile, the younger two-leg just stood and watched, flabbergasted.

"Be careful!" Tigerstripe yowled, afraid the weapon would go off and hit Rain.

Rain made a deep growl and jerked the weapon out of the two-leg's hands. She then began to run away from Tigerstripe and the hunters. The older two-leg yelled at the young fox as she took off. The younger one, meanwhile, still stared until the older yelled at him and they both took off after the fox.

"Um...still stuck here!" Tigerstripe called as the fox and hunters began to vanish from his sight.
He sighed, watching as they disappeared into the bushes and the deeper into the forest. "Well, I expected that if she were trying to save me she'd at least try to get me out of this cage," he murmured.

Time passed, and soon, the sun was beginning to rise. Rain had not returned, and neither had the hunters. Tigerstripe growled, becoming impatient. Though his wound had stopped bleeding and stinging, he still longed to be free.

He sighed, wondering if he would ever manage to get out of the cage that had held him nearly a whole night. Realizing that the hunters were nowhere nearby, he leaned against the cage and watched as it fell on its side. Just like before, the door swung open, and he smiled, glad he was successful.

Why didn't I do this hours ago? he thought as he squeezed through the tiny opening of the cage, careful not to irritate his wound. He backed away from the cage and stood for a moment, unsure of what to do.

Though he was free, Rain was still missing, but he was unsure if he should follow after her or not. He sat down, wondering what to do for a few moments. At last, he shook his head. Though Rain was missing, so was Jetfur, and it was his job to find Jetfur, whether Rain was with him or not.
He stood up slowly, guilt flooding over him. He didn't mean to leave Rain. She did save his life, after all, but he had to find Jetfur, and he couldn't afford to waste time by sitting around and waiting for her to return. After all, he didn't need to be searching for two animals. One would suffice.

He sighed and glanced back one last time at the broken cage and discarded objects of the two-legs before turning and walking in the opposite direction. He secretly hoped Rain would return, but he neither heard nor saw any creature. He couldn't even pick up her scent.

"But I'm doing what StarClan is asking me to do, right?" he whispered. Finding Jetfur was his first priority, not Rain. Though

she had been helpful in his mission, he supposed it was time to carry on on his own now.

He continued walking away from where he had been captured, his muscles aching. Though he was tempted to lie down and sleep, he knew he had to get far away from the hunters' grounds first before he could be in safety.

So he walked until the sun was shining bright in the sky, ignoring the pain in his shoulder and his grumbling stomach. As he disappeared into some bushes, he found a quiet clearing with trees providing ample shade.

Glad to have some spot to rest, he laid down, listening as a stream trickled nearby and birds chirped sweetly in the trees.

"This is safe," he murmured, stretching out his legs and closing his eyes. He hadn't realized how exhausted he was, for within a few moments, he was already fast asleep.

When Tigerstripe opened his eyes, he found himself back in the darkened forest of his dreams. He shuddered, remembering this forest before. It was where the cobra had come and latched its jaws onto Jetfur's body. Tigerstripe shivered as he heard a hissing noise once again.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see the cobra approaching, its eyes glowing maliciously. He shuddered, then began to hear a sound. He realized it was the prophecy again, though this time, it seemed to echo with the wind.

"Grave danger is coming your way. The cat with the snake in her name you must stay away. For she will be the cause for the falling of the quiet spirit. Listen to her if you may but you will regret it. Time is breaking apart, and so will your broken heart..."

The words repeated over and over again, haunting Tigerstripe as he stood there, the cobra hissing in one corner and the prophecy repeating itself in the other. As everything began to fade, Tigerstripe noticed two amber eyes staring intently at him. He himself did not recognize those eyes. Soon, the eyes began to fade,

and the prophecy repeated one last time, echoing through Tigerstripe's ears. Then, he jolted awake.

Chapter 19

Tigerstripe awoke, his heart beating rapidly. The prophecy continued to ring in his ears, and he shuddered, wondering why it continued to haunt him. He had left Snakepelt, hadn't he? Why was he still being warned about her?

He sighed and got to his paws, relieved to see some sunlight. The prophecy was beginning to fade now, and he finally was at peace. He glanced around, looking for any sign of Rain, but the fox was nowhere to be found.

He sighed and unwillingly continued on his way, ready to find Jetfur again. He spent all morning searching, finding no traces of anything. He secretly wished he'd run into Rain, but it seemed the fox was long gone, and he shuddered, wondering if perhaps the hunters had gotten to her.

The one scent he was glad not to smell was the hunters. It seemed they had vanished right along with Rain and Jetfur, providing him with a sense of security again. He still shivered at the thought of being locked up in that cage.

Remembering the experience, Tigerstripe glanced at his wound on his shoulder, seeing it had scabbed over. Currently it did not seem to be infected, but he made sure to apply some herbs just in case.

His feet continued to carry him across the forest floor, and he let out a sigh, realizing how lonely he was without anyone with him. He'd always had some animal—Rain, Snakepelt...Now he was all alone to find Jetfur.

As he sulked through the forest, hoping to somehow catch a whiff of his black-furred friend, he was scared out of his wits by a sound.

"Well, hi there!" came a shout.

Tigerstripe jumped and glanced up, noticing a she-cat peeking down

at Tigerstripe from a branch, staring directly at him. He froze though kept his claws sheathed, unsure if this cat was of danger or not. Whoever she was, she certainly was not Jetfur.

"Who are you?" Tigerstripe asked, his voice strained a bit from fear. His heart was still pounding from the little surprise.

"Your spirit guide!" the cat exclaimed.

Tigerstripe let out a groan. "This just got creepy."

The she-cat chuckled heartily. "Don't worry. I'm just kidding. I'm just a mere cat."

Tigerstripe nodded, then relayed his familiar question.

"Have you seen a jet black she-cat around here?" he wondered.

The cat hopped down from the tree and landed on all fours, allowing Tigerstripe to get a better glance at her. Her fur was white with tinges of cream, along with some black markings on her ears and muzzle. He'd never seen such an odd-looking cat before.

"As a matter of fact, yes," she told him. She didn't continue though, her eyes instead traveling up and down Tigerstripe's body as she inspected him.

"What's a handsome fella like you doing in these parts of the forest?" she wondered.

Tigerstripe felt himself blushing and slightly disturbed at the same time. He stood up a bit more, trying to act more courageous.

"Don't you know this forest is haunted?" the she-cat asked.

Oh, great, it never ends, he thought to himself.

"Before I ask why this forest is supposedly haunted, may I ask where you saw the black she-cat? She's my friend, and I've been searching for her for moons," Tigerstripe begged.

"Hmm...yes," the she-cat murmured to herself. "Yes, where did I see

that cat?" She paused and began pacing around, thinking to herself. Tigerstripe stood impatiently, wondering if the she-cat was simply just playing with him.

"Oh, yes!" she exclaimed at last. "The cat was sitting by a stream looking at her reflection. I didn't want to bother her, so I just walked away. The cat might be gone by now..."

"Take me to the stream," Tigerstripe commanded.

The she-cat shrugged. "Sure. Why don't you tell me about yourself along the way?"

His heart pounding, Tigerstripe began following after the mysterious she-cat, praying that she truly was taking him to the stream rather than some other mysterious place. He was a bit sick of surprises by this point.

"So, where you from?" the she-cat asked.

"Um, MoonClan," he explained.

"Never heard of it," the she-cat replied.

"It was an evil clan in a forest far from here," he continued. "We, um, unfortunately lost a big battle and so the clan split up. My friend—Jetfur—and I set out together but were separated by a storm. I've been looking for her for quite a while now."

"Fascinating," the she-cat replied, though Tigerstripe wasn't sure if she was being sarcastic or not.

Up ahead, he could hear the trickling of water, and his heart raced with excitement. Jetfur might very well be sitting at the stream waiting for him. Oh, he could see the look on her face now when he saw her!

"Just up here," the she-cat called, leading Tigerstripe through some bushes. He happily followed and emerged to find a running stream. Sitting at the shore of the stream, like the she-cat had described, was a slim black she-cat.

"Jetfur?!" Tigerstripe called in disbelief.

The cat looked up and blinked quickly at Tigerstripe before turning away. He hadn't been able to get a good enough look at her, and he approached slowly.

"Well, is that your cat buddy?" the cream she-cat asked.

Tigerstripe continued to approach, asking quietly, "Jetfur, is that you?"

The cat spun around this time, and he jumped up in surprise. The she-cat nearly resembled Jetfur, but she appeared to be much older than his friend, and he felt his heart fall.

"You know Jetfur?" the she-cat asked. Even her voice appeared to be different.

"Yes, I do," he explained, hope suddenly fleeing through him again. This cat appeared to know who Jetfur was, and at least that would give him a starting point. "She's my friend, and I've been searching for her."

"Oh, *you're* Tigerstripe?" she asked. "If only she stayed longer..."

Tigerstripe felt his heart drop. How could he have just missed Jetfur?!

"You look an awful lot like her," he noted.

"Yes, you see, she's my daughter," the she-cat announced.

"You're Blackpelt?!" Tigerstripe gasped. "But that's impossible! You're dead!"

Blackpelt chuckled. "Well, I seem not to be," she said. "I'm not sure what you've heard about my death, but I can assure you I am much alive."

"You were killed by some evil cats," Tigerstripe explained.

"Severely injured and dragged away. When I tried to come back

after my daughter, it seemed she was gone too," Blackpelt explained.

"Well, do you know where Jetfur went now?" Tigerstripe asked. "I've been looking for her long and hard."

"Oh, dear, how should I tell you this?" she muttered. "I am so very sorry, Tigerstripe," she began, causing Tigerstripe's heart to sink even lower. "I don't exactly know. She ran into an old friend of hers —Snakekit, er, Snakepelt, I mean. My, they both have grown so much. Jetfur appears to be much more talkative than she used to." She smiled warmly, remembering her daughter's presence.

"S-Snakepelt?" Tigerstripe stammered. What if Snakepelt was planning to harm Jetfur? Oh, maybe it had been wrong to leave her!

"Ah, Snakepelt spoke a bit about you," Blackpelt mentioned. "She said that you had left her while searching for Jetfur and that you apparently didn't need her anymore. But she was determined to find you anyway."

"Do you have any idea where they might've gone?" Tigerstripe asked desperately. "To another clan, perhaps? Or a forest?"

Jetfur's mother let out a deep sigh. "Snakepelt, actually, had apparently been searching long and hard for you. She came back here in quite a somber mood, deciding to give up. You said you didn't need her anymore, and so she was convinced you had set out to a different forest or something. So she ran into Jetfur, and they both set out to look somewhere far away."

Tigerstripe paused. Why did Snakepelt care so much about finding him? Hadn't he made his message clear? Hadn't he shown her enough cruelty by leaving her? Why would she continue to pursue him?

Well, at least I know Jetfur's not completely alone and is most definitely alive, he told himself.
"I need to go after them!" Tigerstripe shouted. He spun around and glanced back at his shoulder at Blackpelt. "Thank you," he said and

took off in the opposite direction, traveling farther into the forest.

"GOOD LUCK ON YOUR JOURNEY, TIGERSTRIPE!" Blackpelt called as he finally lost sight of her.

He traveled quickly, running farther into the woods.

Suddenly, he heard pounding footsteps behind him, and he spun his neck around to find the cream colored she-cat chasing after him.

"What are you doing?!" he exclaimed.

"Do you mind if I join you?" the she-cat asked.

Tigerstripe paused for a moment. Though he didn't really need another cat alongside him, it would be lonely traveling by himself. Perhaps the she-cat could be of assistance too.

"Sure. Just don't slow me down!" he teased, continuing to run.

She chuckled slightly. "Since I know your name, I should probably return the favor by telling you mine. My name is Krait."

"Krait," he repeated the name. "Well, Krait, I need help finding Snakepelt and Jetfur."

"Sure, let's go!" she called.

Together, they traveled together, farther in the forest, ready to continue their expedition.

Chapter 20

With Krait by his side, Tigerstripe continued padding through the forest, no longer racing on his paws but still walking at a fast pace, his only goal in mind to find the whereabouts of Snakepelt and Jetfur.

At first he believed Krait could not keep up, but the she-cat had proven herself and obviously had high stamina, for she was able to follow Tigerstripe's pace well. He realized in the brief moments he'd known her that he liked her very much.

Krait was an older she-cat; he suspected she'd be a senior warrior if she were in a clan. But she had a charming personality, was nearly as stubborn as him, and strode bravely as if nothing could ever bother her. He wondered if there was a cat in the forest who did not like her.

For the first few hours they traveled, she'd been very helpful too, offering to find prey, helping him decide which direction to go in, and so forth. She didn't nag him like Snakepelt did or didn't have the same sweet composure as Rain, but she was company, and that was that.

As they turned a corner, disappearing deeper into the tall trees, Tigerstripe picked up an odd scent, and not a moment later, he heard a twig crack. He froze suddenly, but Krait continued walking. Noticing Tigerstripe had stopped, she spun around.

"What's wrong, scaredy cat? Let's keep going," she urged him.

Tigerstripe nodded, at first believing that he would run into the hunters, but he supposed it had just been a squirrel or some other forest animal. Perhaps it would even be his dinner.

As soon as Tigerstripe began to calm down though, a booming voice echoed from nearby.

"And where do you think you're going?!" came a raspy, odd voice.

A fox suddenly leapt out of the bushes, and while Tigerstripe had prayed it was Rain, he knew immediately by the fox's large size and horrifying glare that this was not a kind fox. This was a fox that knew the structure of the food chain, not some little fox kit.

Krait skidded to a halt beside Tigerstripe, and Tigerstripe watched as the fox shot a glare at Krait, his gaze fully focused on her.

Trying to be brave, Tigerstripe slowly took a step forward and puffed out his broad chest, speaking in the deepest voice possible.

"T-To find Jetfur!" he announced, stammering only slightly.

Krait shot him a look, noticing his fear, and rolled her eyes, he gaze turning back toward the fox. How come she acted so calm?

"Not until I rip the guts out of Krait for what she did!" the fox sneered, shoving his muzzle into Krait's face. Krait let out a tiny hiss and swatted him away with her paw.

"What did Krait ever do to you?" Tigerstripe demanded.

He had no knowledge of Krait's past, but she didn't seem to him like a violent, cruel she-cat. He assumed whatever fight that the cat and fox had gotten into in the past was certainly the fox's fault.

"Heh, heh," Krait laughed nervously. She turned to Tigerstripe and shrunk down slightly, a weak smile on her face. "About that..."

Tigerstripe felt anger rippling through his veins. What if this she-cat was more trouble than he expected? After all, she'd just lured a fox. What other creatures had she made enemies of?

"Krait, do you have something you wish to share?" Tigerstripe asked in a quiet voice, trying to submerge his anger.

"RAHH!" the fox shouted, snapping at Krait. The she-cat quickly leapt aside, dodging his attack.
Tigerstripe rolled his eyes, deciding that Krait could deal with this on her own. After all, the fox seemed to have taken no interest in

him. Instead, he stepped back a few steps from them and began wandering close by in the other direction.

"SNAKEPELT! JETFUR!" he called out, hoping to hear some sort of response. He glanced back slightly, seeing Krait and the fox were still engaged in a miniature battle.

He turned around, about to tell Krait to knock it off, when Krait caught Tigerstripe's eye and glanced back at the fox.

"Wowza. Look at the time. I've got to--"

The fox nearly bit her flank, ignoring her statement. Krait let out a yelp, shouting, "RUN!" and took off past Tigerstripe. The fox glanced at Tigerstripe slightly, and then Tigerstripe smiled weakly and took off after the she-cat, the fox following behind.

Fortunately, the fox didn't have the same speed that Krait and Tigerstripe possessed, and soon, they were quickly outrunning him. Tigerstripe's heart pounded as he struggled to keep up with Krait, and he panted heavily, out of breath.

"I'm not sure if I told you yet, but I don't have a very smooth relationship with foxes!" Krait shouted at him as they continued to sprint through the woods.

"You don't say?" Tigerstripe replied, continuing to run as fast as his paws could carry him.
After a while, when Tigerstripe felt as if his legs were going to collapse from under him, Krait halted by a log, her chest heaving up and down as she caught her breath.

"I think we lost him," she huffed.

Tigerstripe nodded, too exhausted to speak. He paused for a moment, then heard a sound from the log. He turned, watching as a large badger lumbered out of the log.

"RUN!" Tigerstripe shouted, beginning to take off again, this time from the badger that Krait had brought them to.

"OH YEAH! BADGERS AREN'T FOND OF ME EITHER!" Krait

shouted as they ran again, though this time their pace was slower, and the badger followed behind, growling loudly.

"I get it! You don't have any smooth relationships!" he hissed angrily, tired of running from wild animals.

What's next? he thought. *A wild dog?*

Seeing the badger was close behind, Tigerstripe watched as Krait spun around and slashed at the badger's nose. Tigerstripe glanced back, watching blood drip down the badger's nose. It roared in rage, and Krait picked up her pace again.

"Maybe that wasn't the best idea," she said. The badger suddenly swung one of his large paws and knocked Krait off her paws. She squealed, tumbled, and quickly heaved herself back up to her feet, running more quickly.

Tigerstripe ran after her, but he was becoming more and more tired, and the badger was coming more and more closer with each passing second.

"WE HAVE TO STOP IT!" Krait shouted.

"We can't! It's too dangerous!" Tigerstripe argued.

"Well, then we have to hide or something! It's gaining on us!" Krait shouted, turning around to see the badger was nearly within a fox's length of them.

Tigerstripe groaned, knowing it was no use to run anymore. They were going to have to face the badger head-on. He stopped and launched at the beast, clawing at its nose.

The badger reared up off the ground a little and roared. Krait followed Tigerstripe's lead and snuck up behind the badger, throwing herself at it. She bit down harshly on its flank.

Tigerstripe, meanwhile, clawed at the badger's striped pelt until a massive paw pushed him off and sent him spiraling toward the earth. The badger then pinned Krait down, and Tigerstripe watched as it put its sharp teeth in front of her face.

"Uh...maybe we can work this out?" Krait suggested, laughing nervously.

The badger growled and raised its sharp claws, ready to kill the she-cat, when another badger roar echoed in the distance. There was a short pause, though to Tigerstripe, it felt like an eternity, and the badger slowly released Krait and backed away, remaining frozen.

"Are you okay?" Tigerstripe asked Krait, rushing to her side.

"Fine, fine," Krait assured him, standing back up on her paws. "That almost ended nastily, huh?"
Before Tigerstripe could answer, another rustle came from the bushes, and Tigerstripe groaned, expecting it to be the other badger they had heard, coming to kill them, but he was instead surprised to find a cat.

The cat was all white with splashes of brown and black. His face looked triangular, and his eyes were a bright green. He approached the badger willingly, the two animals locking their gaze on each other. A she-cat joined the tom a moment later. She looked the same as him, with some more splashes of color. Tigerstripe noticed that her eyes, in contrast, were two different colors—blue and green. The smaller she-cat also came up to the badger. The badger echoed a small grunt in response, but the she-cat didn't flinch. She instead sat in front of the badger and stared at it.

Then, Tigerstripe watched as the she-cat whispered something in the badger's ear. The badger stared at her for a moment, and Tigerstripe feared the badger would injured her with his massive paws, but instead, he merely grunted and walked away from the cats, leaving the she-cat to smile as he disappeared from their sight.

"Uh, thanks?" Tigerstripe spoke in response, still in shock from what he had just witnessed.

"Now how in the world did you do that?" Krait asked curiously.

"Oh, I'm sorry," the she-cat mewed. "The badger looked like it was about to rip you to shreds, so I had to do something."

The tom, meanwhile, padded over to the she-cat and faced Tigerstripe and Krait, smiling at both of them.

"This is Harly," he said, introducing the she-cat. "My name is Riley. I apologize for that odd spectacle. She can't control herself for helping strangers."

Before Tigerstripe could thank them profusely, he blurted out, "Have you seen a jet black she-cat and her friend around here?"

Harly glanced at Riley, but the tom shook his head.

"No, sorry. All we have seen today was the badger incident and some hunters. It was weird because I swore those hunters were going to a cat clan. I've seen them hunt foxes and badgers, but never cats."

"Odd," Tigerstripe muttered, his heart sinking. "Well, thank you for your help, but we better be off now."

"Wait! Were you looking for anyone else?" Harly wondered. "This may sound weird, and you probably won't believe me, but there was this fox actually talking cat to us. Her grammar was way off, and she had a strong accent, but it was quite intruiging to listen to her. She said she was looking for some cat called--" Harly paused, then sighed. "Oh, great. I forgot. She really wanetd me to look for that cat!"

Krait stopped and chuckled and slightly. "Well, I for sure haven't heard of that fox. I only know one fox whose cat speech is fluent, and he for sure doesn't like me."

"Rain?" Tigerstripe asked, relieved to hear the fox was alive. He shook his head, then sighed. No, he needed to find Jetfur.

"It doesn't look like it's going to rain," Harly said, looking up at the sky.

"Harly, I think he means Rain is the fox's name," Riley replied.

"Oh, well so that means you know her," Harly spoke. "Are you two good friends?"

"Uh, you could say that," Tigerstripe muttered, guilt filling up his insides.

"So, then why don't you go find her if you're good friends?" Krait suggested.

Tigerstripe growled slightly. "Well, that's not the point," he muttered, beginning to walk away from the two odd cats.

"Okay, suit yourself," Riley said. "That fox 'Rain' sounded like she was in a great amount of trouble though." He glanced over at Harly, continuing to speak. "What were those two-legs jabbering about, Harly?"

The she-cat flicked her tail and shrugged. "I haven't really learned the sounds of a two-leg, Riley."

"What are you meowing about?" Krait asked, coming to a halt. "Cats can't understand two-legs. That's impossible."

Harly looked a little taken aback by Krait's statement. "It's *nearly* impossible, not completely impossible."

Tigerstripe stared weirdly. "Well, I'm going to keep walking now."

Krait nodded and followed behind him. "Me too!" she called. "Peace out, no-tail weirdos!"

Harly was apparently offended and shouted as they walked away, "HEY, WE HAVE TAILS! JUST SHORTER!" Tigerstripe glanced back watching as she spun away and disappeared, Riley following behind her.

"Wow, that was a weird encounter. What did I say again?" Krait asked.

"Stuff about no-tailed weirdos," Tigerstripe replied, trying to ignore the fact that Rain was in great danger. *I have to find Jetfur,* he reminded himself. *I can't think about Rain.*

"Well, let's keep on looking," Krait suggested.

Tigerstripe nodded, and together, they padded off, Tigerstripe still deep in guilt about his fox friend.

Chapter 21

Tigerstripe and Krait, meanwhile, traveled farther and farther from the two strange cats they had met, finding themselves going deeper and deeper into the forest. Tigerstripe kept his nose high in the air, hoping that he'd catch a whiff of Snakepelt or Jetfur, but so far, he'd had no luck.

"So let me get this straight,"Krait began to speak when they were a bit far from Harly and Riley. "You befriended a fox?"

"Yeah," Tigerstripe responded, guessing it was an odd thing to tell other cats. But then again, hadn't Harly just coaxed that badger into leaving them alone?

"How is that even possible?!"Krait exclaimed. "You've already seen my relationship with foxes. Well, then again, cats and foxes aren't exactly meant to be friends, now, are they?"

"Perhaps I just have a better attitude," Tigerstripe teased.

Krait rolled her eyes. "Foxes don't just cling to cats, you know."

"Well, this fox literally clung to me," Tigerstripe continued.

"What are you even blabbering about?" Krait wondered.

"I ran into Rain when she was just a small kit. I thought a kitten had grabbed ahold of my leg, but when I looked down, there was a bundle of ginger fur there. Actually, I tried to ditch her for a long time, but she kept following me, and soon enough, we just became friends, I guess," he explained.

"Ah, of course. Friends from kithood. And how big is your fox friend now? Who's to say she won't become vicious?" Krait asked.

"She won't," Tigerstripe responded a bit too quickly. Krait looked at him, a bit alarmed, and then he turned his gaze back down to his

paws.

"I mean, I don't think she would. She's grown, and she's nearly taller than me now, but she's still gentle. She's still looking for me, isn't she?" he reminded her.

"Also that. If she's such a good friend of yours, why are you neglecting to go after her?" Krait wondered.

Tigerstripe began to feel himself getting angry. It was a question that was continually circling his mind. He knew Rain meant a lot to him, but he knew also that Jetfur meant so much more, and the last thing he needed was to go on two wild goose chases.

"I have to find Jetfur!" he growled.
"Feisty, much?" Krait questioned. "Well, do you have any idea where Jetfur and her friend may have gone?"

"I have no idea. That's why I'm keeping my nose high in the air," Tigerstripe told her, lifting his nose high to demonstrate.

Krait chuckled a little. "Well, I'll try my best to be of help."

"Before we get too comfortable with each other, are there any other enemies I should know about?" Tigerstripe asked. "You don't seem to make friends that easily."

Krait laughed and shoved Tigerstripe a bit with her tail. "My friend, you have nothing to worry about. While you are right about the friends part, my poor relationships with other creatures should have no effect on you."

"Are you sure? Because if we run into a wild dog next that you've made a poor acquaintance with, I'm taking off," Tigerstripe warned.

Krait rolled her eyes. "As if. You want company, and so do I. Now, we shouldn't run into any wild dogs...hopefully."

Tigerstripe groaned, knowing this would be a long trip.

And so the two traveled together for the next several sunrises with no sign of Jetfur or Snakepelt. Tigerstripe had even been hoping to

run into Rain along the way, but so far, they'd come across no familiar faces.

Fortunately, Krait had been right in saying that they wouldn't be bothered. Despite the first day traveling together with the fox and badger attack, they had not run into any more wild animals, providing Tigerstripe with a sense of relief. Even the hunters had not reappeared.

All was quiet and peaceful,and while Tigerstripe appreciated this traveling method, he was desperate for some excitement, for something to happen. He felt farther and farther from Jetfur with each passing minute, and he found himself beginning to doubt himself again.

Krait kept him good company though, often joking around with him and assuring him that they'd find the two she-cats, even if she had to "chew off her own tail." Krait was odd, strange, yet at the same time hilarious, and Tigerstripe found that he got along with her much better than he had with Snakepelt.

But then again, all the cat she had traveled with had been different. Of course, traveling with Jetfur had been his favorite, and he wished desperately that they'd got to travel together much longer than the time they'd been given.

Rain was quiet, but she was also sweet, caring, and fearless. He tried to keep the fox out of his mind most of the time, but she still managed to reappear. Still, as the days passed and he caught no sight of her, he began to let her drift from him more and more. He did not expect to see the fox again.

Snakepelt had been the oddest experience. Though they had bickered, they had worked well together, and Tigerstripe remembered the odd feeling of joy he had when they were together, but the prophecy from StarClan had changed everything, and he'd been forced to say good-bye.

While Tigerstripe was desperate to find Jetfur, he wasn't so excited to see Snakepelt again. He feared that Jetfur was in great danger in her presence, and he knew that Snakepelt would not be pleased to

see him if they did happen to run into each other.

Tigerstripe had already relayed this onto Krait, but she only just shook her head and assured him all would be fine. Tigerstripe found himself very open with Krait, though the she-cat continued to remain a mystery to him. He knew very little about her, just that she was a rogue traveling the forest.

He once asked her about clan life, but she only shook her head, explaining how it was never for her. He continued this by asking if she had ever lived in a clan, but once again, she shook her head. He couldn't judge her too harshly though. After all, his clan experience had been very different from a normal clan experience, and he was perfectly fine living as a rogue. The lack of openness that Krait had with him, however, sometimes frightened him, and he wondered if she were holding some dark secret.

But it was nearly impossible to think that of Krait when she made jokes all day and cooperated well with him. It wasn't like he cared to hear her life story either. He had not shared everything with her, so why should she share everything with him?

"Wake up," Krait snapped at Tigerstripe, shoving him with her paw one morning. His eyes opened, and he found the she-cat leaning over him.

"Huh? What?" he asked. Sunlight already filled the sky, and he wondered how long Krait had been lingering around, waiting for him to wake.

"Breakfast is served," she told him.

"Oh, good!" Tigerstripeexclaimed, rising from the nest he had created the night before. His stomach rumbled, and he glanced around, noticing that there was not a piece of prey to be found.

"Did you save some for me?"Tigerstripe asked, annoyed that Krait had lied to him.

Krait chuckled. "While you were sleeping like a kit, I went and looked around. There's a meadow nearby and it's hopping full of

rabbits. We'll be having a feast today, my friend."

"Mm...rabbits," Tigerstripe replied, licking his lips in satisfaction.

Starving, he followed Krait toward the meadow and found that she had been right. They crouched behind a rock and watched as a family of rabbits gathered together and hopped around.Others were nearby, casually hopping around like they were in no danger.

They must not be used to predators in this area, Tigerstripe thought. He had never seen so much prey in one place before, and he was then reminded of the scarce prey he had in MoonClan, though he, being the leader's son, was always fed well. But he assumed that lesser warriors, such as Jetfur, probably were not.

"I'll take the left, you take the right," Krait instructed him.

Tigerstripe nodded, and together, they went off in opposite directions. Tigerstripe crouched down and began crawling through the tall, golden grass, his eyes fixated on the rabbits only pawsteps from him.

Suddenly, he leapt into the air, landing on top of one of the rabbits. Krait did the same, and within a matter of seconds, he already had a dead rabbit hanging from his jaws. He left the dead rabbit where he'd caught it and raced off after the others. Krait did the same, and by the time all the rabbits had scurried into their burrows, they'd managed to catch a total of three more.

As Krait said, they ate a grand feast for breakfast, and Tigerstripe felt just a bit bloated as he bit off the remainder of the rabbit meat on the rabbit he and Krait were sharing (they'd already eaten two separately).

"Well, I don't know about you, but I don't think I need to eat for another moon," Krait joked.

"Agreed," Tigerstripe replied.

Leaving their rabbit bones behind, they headed off once more into the forest. Despite Tigerstripe's desire to vomit, he looked ahead, thinking now of Jetfur. He just hoped they'd find a clue soon.

Chapter 22

It had been nearly a moon since Tigerstripe had set off with Krait, and still they had found no signs of either Snakepelt or Jetfur. Tigerstripe had begun to get more and more frantic, and while Krait's jovial personality often calmed in, he couldn't help but feel anxious most of the time.

Krait often assured him that they'd have to run into something eventually, but Tigerstripe felt himself growing farther and farther away from their trail. He wished Blackpelt had been able to give him more information about Jetfur's whereabouts.

Often times, his mind drifted to Rain too, and he wondered if she was still alive. He never knew if the hunters had gotten her or not, and even if she had escaped, he wondered if she'd be okay on her own.

Of course she would, he told himself. *She's a fox. She doesn't need me.*

Tigerstripe still wouldn't mind seeing his fox friend now and again, just to make sure she was safe and healthy. He never mentioned her near Krait, thinking she wouldn't understand the odd relationship they'd formed.

Tigerstripe awoke one morning to find Krait pushing against him with her paws. He slowly opened his eyes, finding the she-cat leaning over him.

"Finally!" she exclaimed as Tigerstripe slowly sat up.

"What?" he asked.

"I've been trying to wake you up for days!" Krait exaggerated. "You are quite a heavy sleeper. I thought clan cats could wake in a pinch."

"Well, I'm not technically a clan cat anymore," Tigerstripe

responded, rising to his feet now. He stretched his sore muscles and let out a large morning yawn.

"In addition, we've been walking all day for several days. I really value my time asleep," he continued.

Krait rolled her eyes. "Yeah, you're not a clan cat, you say. I'm not so sure this rogue life is for you. A rogue walks all day for all of his or her life. You don't see me sleeping all day," Krait argued.

Tigerstripe chuckled slightly. "Well, I'll try to work on that."

"Good luck," Krait mumbled.

"Any news?" he asked.

"Nothing here," Krait reported. "I went and looked around a little, but all I could find was a measly mouse. There weren't any new scents or anything. No one has been in this part of the forest for moons."

Tigerstripe felt his heart sink slowly, but it was quickly replaced by growing hunger.

"You caught a mouse, you say?"

"Yup. Ate it too."

"You didn't save any for me?!" Tigerstripe exclaimed.

"Hey, if you're going to laze around all day, then don't expect me to catch your breakfast. There should be plenty of prey around here. Come on," she called, leading him away from their previous night's shelter.

Tigerstripe followed Krait deeper into the forest, his eyes and nose on the lookout for any sign of prey. Suddenly, he heard a rustling from the nearby bushes and crept down, watching as a small robin hopped out and pecked at the ground, oblivious to the fact that Tigerstripe and Krait were nearby.

Licking his lips, Tigerstripe leapt at the bird and caught it mid-air as

it attempted to fly away. He killed it in a heartbeat and was left with a delicious breakfast.

"Pretty good catch, huh?" he said to Krait.

"Eh, I could do better," Krait jokingly replied.

Tigerstripe quickly gobbled up his breakfast and was on his way again, praying to StarClan that they'd get just a clue or small sign that Jetfur was nearby. Krait, as always, trotted by his side, remaining as vigilant as Tigerstripe.

They traveled for awhile with, as always, no luck. During this time Tigerstripe and Krait barely spoke to each other, having already discussed many topics during their travel. Besides, Tigerstripe was becoming increasingly more irritated with each passing day, and he supposed Krait had picked up on this by the way she remained quiet.

"Do you think we're heading in the wrong direction?" Tigerstripe asked.

Krait shrugged. "How would I know?"

"Well, you were in that forest with Jetfur's mother. Did you ever run into Jetfur?" he asked.

"I'm a rogue, Tigerstripe. I thought we went over this. I walk all day, sleep at night, then repeat. I had just come into the forest that day. I had no idea your kitty friend was there," she explained.

Tigerstripe let out a groan. No one could ever help him find out anything about Jetfur.

"Don't be so hard about it. We've got to run into something eventually, right?"

"It's been nearly a moon, and I feel even farther away from Snakepelt and Jetfur. It's like we've gone in the completely opposite direction!" he exclaimed, exasperated.

"Well, I can't help you," Krait told him. She obviously noticed he

was irritated, and normally, she'd become quiet at this point, but it seemed she wanted to set Tigerstripe straight today.

"Then why are you here?" Tigerstripe sneered.

Krait narrowed her eyes.

"Listen up here, Mr. Bossypants. I offered to help you because I saw you needed help and thought 'Hey, it might be fun traveling with someone for once.' I have worked my tail off trying to help you this past moon, and I've barely received any thanks. A little gratitude would be nice, don't you think?" Krait shot back.

Tigerstripe shrunk down, feeling guilty again. He knew it wasn't right to take everything out on Krait, but he'd become so frustrated. He'd lost Jetfur, Snakepelt, Rain, and he couldn't afford to lose Krait too. He realized she was the only one really keeping him sane for this entire journey. If he had traveled by himself, he'd probably be lying in a ditch contemplating life around now.

"No, you're right," Tigerstripe replied. "I'm sorry. You have been of a lot of help, and I haven't been very kind about it at all. Thank you for coming. I really do appreciate it. I know lots of times I act like I don't need anyone, but I really do need someone by me at all times. You've really helped calm me down and lighten my mood, so I'm sorry. I've just become really irritated."

"You think I don't know that?" she asked. "I know you're furious, and I would be too. How long has your friend been missing now?"

"Moons," Tigerstripe murmured.

"Yeah, I would definitely have gone insane by now and given up. But I like your persistence, Tigerstripe. You haven't given up yet despite all the obstacles you've faced. And I know that when you find Jetfur, she'll be mighty glad to hear all these things you've done to find her," Krait told him. "Now let's keep on going."

Tigerstripe smiled weakly, glad for Krait's motivational speech. He felt more compelled and inspired now, and he walked quicker with a taller stride, knowing that Jetfur could not remain lost forever. He

had to run into her eventually. When that would be, he had no idea, but he was going to keep on trying regardless of the consequences.

They continued on their way for the rest of the day, and though they didn't seem to find anything to help them, Tigerstripe felt more confident and more determined in his search. He was glad Krait had spoken with him and hoped that he wouldn't become too irritated in the future.

Soon enough, the sky had begun to turn darker, and another day was about to end. Tigerstripe's limbs were already sore, and he eagerly looked around for a place to sleep. Krait appeared to be tired too, though Tigerstripe knew she'd never admit it.

After several minutes of glancing around, he eventually found a spot where a large clump of trees provided shelter. Grabbing some moss for him and Krait, the two formed the moss into nests and slept underneath the trees.

Tigerstripe let out a large yawn, exhausted from yet another long day of traveling. He stretched out his limbs and then curled up. He glanced across from him, seeing that Krait was already dead asleep.

And she claimed she never gets tired, he thought to himself.

This made him laugh slightly, and slowly, he lowered his head to the forest floor and closed his eyes, beginning to drift off to sleep.

Krait's speech still rang through his ears as he drifted off, and he felt excited for the following day, hoping that they'd run into something.

Please, StarClan, please bring some cat our way, he thought.

Then, his thoughts began to fade, and he disappeared into deep sleep, his anxious thoughts and excitement fading into nothing but darkness and comfort.

Chapter 23

An entire moon had passed since Tigerstripe had set off with Krait in search for Jetfur and Snakepelt. The days seemed like they were becoming shorter and shorter, and all the while, Tigerstripe felt he was getting farther and farther from the two. He had not snapped at Krait since their discussion, but he still at times felt irritated, desperately wondering when he would receive some clue.

Tigerstripe awoke in the morning around the same time as Krait. The two exchanged weak smiles but spoke no words. Instead, they did as they regularly would do and left the vacant den they were resting in to find breakfast.

After not too long of searching, the two both found themselves indulging on some mice. Tigerstripe licked everything clean from his mouse, the only thing remaining being clear white bones.

With breakfast finished, it was time to move on again. Tigerstripe headed in a random direction (as he often did now) wondering if maybe *this* was the correct way to Jetfur. Krait never questioned him, but at times she would give him help in deciding which way to go.

They had only been walking a few minutes when a scent lingered across Tigerstripe's nose. He sniffed it curiously, not recognizing it, but it definitely smelled like many cats were in the area.

"Do you smell that?" he asked Krait.

The she-cat nodded her head. "It's stale, but it seems to me like several cats were here."

"It might be a clan!"Tigerstripe exclaimed excitedly. In all their time searching, they'd very rarely run into clans, more-or-less a cat.

Krait didn't seem so excited at this idea.

"I don't know. Like I said, the scent seems stale..."

"We can follow it at least. Maybe there is a clan nearby," Tigerstripe suggested. Krait didn't argue, and the two began walking in direction of the scent. Tigerstripe's heart raced with anticipation. He wondered if perhaps Jetfur had come to this clan and now he was only moments away from seeing her. Or maybe the clan had more information on where she might've gone. The possibilities were endless!

The two wandered farther into the forest, but Tigerstripe slowly felt the scent fading from him. He glanced around, curious, wondering why it might've faded.

"This seems like a good spot for a clan though," Tigerstripe spoke quietly.

"Maybe there is no clan nearby," Krait thought. "Nothing smells fresh here."

"But you still smell something?"

Krait paused for a moment and lifted her nose to the air. She then nodded.

"Well, it won't hurt to search a little longer," Tigerstripe decided.

They continued into the thick forest. Tigerstripe kept his eyes out for any sign of movement, but he saw nothing. His ears, however, pricked at the sound of rushing water nearby.

"Do you hear that?" he asked Krait.

"Ah, it must be a river,"Krait said. "Let's go check it out. I want to see how those cats catch fish."

"But--" Tigerstripe began to argue.

"Don't you whimper. You can get a drink of water," she suggested.

Tigerstripe sighed and agreed, his throat feeling a bit parched. They headed in the direction of the water until they came upon a wide

river with rushing water. Krait headed over to the river's edge excitedly while Tigerstripe crept down and lapped up some water with his tongue.

He turned to the side, watching Krait stare intently at the water.

"How do you plan on catching a fish?" he asked.

Krait paused then quickly stuck her paw into the water, scooping up a fresh trout. She flung it onto the ground where it flopped around then killed it with a simple slash of her claws.

"Ha!" she told him.

"Well, are you going to eat it?" Tigerstripe asked.

Krait shrugged, sniffing the fish. She pulled away and stuck out her tongue, obviously disgusted.
"That's a strong scent!"

Tigerstripe rolled his eyesand laughed quietly when suddenly he was interrupted by the quiet voice of someone behind him.

"Um, hello."

Tigerstripe and Krait both spun around to see a ginger tabby she-cat and brown tabby tom staring at them oddly. They were both much younger than Tigerstripe and Krait, not old enough to be warriors, making Tigerstripe wonder if there perhaps was a clan nearby.

"Who are you?!" Kraitexclaimed.

"The question is, who are you?"the she-cat asked, looking a tad annoyed.

"I'm Tigerstripe," he said, staring at the two. He paused for a moment, then asked, "Have you seen a jet black she-cat?"

The two seemed even more disturbed by his odd comment, and it took an exchanging of glances between them before the tom spoke.

"Uh, no," the brown tabby said. "Who's your friend, Tigerstripe?"

"This is Krait," he explained, pointing his tail to the she-cat.

"Have you perhaps seen a clan nearby?" the ginger tabby asked. "RiverClan, to be exact?"

Tigerstripe opened his mouth to speak but Krait beat him to it.

"I thought this camp was abandoned,"she said, staring around. "Where are your clanmates? Do you live here? Do you eat this fishy stuff?" she asked, gesturing to the dead fish at her paws.

"Do you think I would be asking you if I knew?" the she-cat replied.

Just then, a rustle came from the bushes. The fish Krait had caught must've let off a strong scent, for a large fox emerged and bristled.

"Uh..." Krait began, backing away.

Tigerstripe rolled his eyes,annoyed. *Here we go again,* he thought.

"Give the fish to the fox, Krait," he spoke to her quietly. "Don't you remember last time?"

"What are you talking about?" the she-cat asked.

"Long story," he murmured in response.

Krait quickly knocked the fish towards the fox, but her aim was weak, and it ended up slapping the fox in the face. The fox growled and immediately charged at Krait, leaving the fish behind. The she-cat swiftly moved to the side, but the fox continued following her. Tigerstripe stood there and did nothing, now used to Krait's antics.

"That's a sure smart she-cat you're traveling with," the tom joked, laughing as Krait and fox continued chasing each other in circles.

"Aren't you going to go after her?" the she-cat asked, obviously concerned.

"Not unless she needs help."

Krait began running around in circles, confusing the fox. When she

had her chance, she lunged onto the fox's back but missed, landing on the other side of the fox. The fox growled and pinned Krait to the ground. Tigerstripe tensed and waited, ready to take action if he needed to.

Before the attacker could cause any harm, however, something pulled at its tail. The fox yelped in surprise and released its grip on Krait.

"Hey! Don't you ever harm her!" came a shout. Tigerstripe watched to see a gray tom emerge. Krait's eyes, meanwhile, widened in surprise.

The tom and the fox began to chase each other in circles as Krait had done before. When the tom had his chance, however, he lashed out at the fox, his claws snagging onto the fox's muzzle. He let go, blood drizzling from the muzzle. The fox, tired from fighting, let out one last whimper and fled, leaving the fish behind.

"Who are you?" Tigerstripe asked, rushing to the tom. "And have you seen a jet black she-cat?"

"Do you say that to *every* cat?" the brown tabby tom called from behind him.

"DUSTY!" Krait shouted, rushing toward the tom. She nuzzled him affectionately and then began to chat eagerly. "How are the kits? Are they well? Do they miss me?"

"I-I thought you were dead!" Dusty exclaimed.

Tigerstripe, meanwhile, stood, watching the whole situation unveil. He had never known that Krait had a mate or had kits of her own. He supposed maybe this was why she had kept her personal life so secret from him.

Krait chuckled. "Do I *look* dead?" She licked his cheek and smiled. "Is Mouse being nice to her sister? Is Nessie eating the whole vole instead of just half? How are they? How are they? How are they?"

Dusty's facial expression, meanwhile, had changed suddenly, and he glanced down at his paws, shuffling them. "Uh, the kits...Yes, the

kits...Uh..." He paused for a few moments, then glanced back into Krait's eyes. "I don't know where they are."

Krait froze, her excitement quickly fading. "You. Lost. The. KITS?!" She then giggled, looking back at Dusty. "You're kidding, right?"

Dusty shuffled his paws once more and shook his head.

"YOU LOST OUR KITS?!"

"Can someone explain what's going on?!" Tigerstripe exclaimed at last, incredibly confused.
Dusty looked past Krait at Tigerstripe. "Who's that?" he wondered.

"Oh, that's Tigerstripe. Tigerstripe, Dusty, my mate. Dusty, Tigerstripe, some cat trying to find another cat. There. Now that we're acquainted, where are the kits?!"

Dusty still shuffled uncomfortably for a little while. "I had them for a little while and then one sunrise, they weren't there."

Krait fluffed up, clearly enraged. "YOU LOST MY KITS! MY ONLY KITS! HOW COULD YOU?!" She shook Dusty vigorously, screeching, "HOW COULD YOU?!"

Dusty was frozen in place."I'm sorry! It wasn't my fault!"

"You better run, Dusty," the brown tom snickered. Tigerstripe watched as the she-cat hit him with her paw.

Krait stared at the tom in anger as he lowered his head. After a few minutes though, Tigerstripe could see Krait's muscles relaxing. She sighed, then spoke. "No, it's all right...I will find them."

"What about Jetfur?"Tigerstripe asked, a bit annoyed.

"Did you say 'Jetfur?'" Dusty asked, perking back up. "Are you that cat who's looking for her?"

"Yes! Where is she?"Tigerstripe asked anxiously.

"Um, I might have an idea of where the kits are," Dusty suggested to

Krait.

"But what about Jetfur?"Tigerstripe wondered.

The tom began to move, and Tigerstripe quickly followed after him. He turned, seeing the two young cats were following them.

The tom paused in his tracksand spun around. "This is kind of a long way," he explained.

Krait shrugged. "We've been traveling so long we don't care if it's another long trip. I'm sure we'll all arrive at the same destination one way or another." She then turned her gaze to the two cats behind her. "You coming?"

The two cats glanced at each other in shock and then began whispering so quietly that even Tigerstripe could not pick up on what they were saying even though they were standing right near him.

After a few minutes of discussion, the tom spoke up.

"We'll come!" he announced.

"Please, just show us Jetfur,"Tigerstripe whimpered.

And so together with Krait, her newfound mate, Dusty, and two RiverClan apprentices, Tigerstripe headed off on yet another adventure, hoping that this time it would indeed lead him to find Jetfur.

Chapter 24

Tigerstripe slowly opened his eyes and let out a large yawn, finding another sunny day. He had been traveling with Krait, Dusty, and the two RiverClan apprentices—now known as Flamepaw and Barkpaw—for a few days now, and the few days' journey had exhausted him.

He hadn't been exactly sure where they were heading to, but he hoped Dusty was leading him to Jetfur or was hopefully leading him to some clue of where Jetfur might be. Krait seemed ecstatic to find her kits though, and Tigerstripe, not wanting to be rude, didn't bring up Jetfur that often.

All around him, the other cats began to rise, and after a quick breakfast, it was time to start up on the journey again. As Tigerstripe began walking (he stayed behind Krait and Dusty and in front of Flamepaw and Barkpaw) he prayed silently to StarClan that he'd have some hope in finding Jetfur.

The group padded on for awhile that morning, and Tigerstripe watched as clouds slowly began covering the blue sky, eventually the sun, shielding them in a gray atmosphere. Tigerstripe expected the rain to come down soon, but the sky only remained cloudy for quite some time.

The temperature began to cool some, and the wind began to pick up. Tigerstripe tensed slightly as wind ruffled against his pelt as he was reminded of the fateful storm so long ago that had separated him from Jetfur. Perhaps he would rediscover her in this coming storm?

They came to the top of a hill now, Dusty leading the way. As Tigerstripe hiked to the top, however, he watched as Dusty froze and pricked his ears. Tigerstripe was about to ask why he had paused when he heard the faint sound of barking in the distance.

"What was that?" Dusty asked.

Behind Tigerstripe, Barkpaw pricked his ears and replied, "I'm not sure."

Tigerstripe knew the barking could only come from one source—dogs. He had rarely ever run into wild dogs, but he knew they could be vicious and kill them quickly. The barking soon grew louder, and Tigerstripe was surprised that he was able to discern some words being spoken.

"POSSIBILITY! BUT, UM, VERY SLIM! YEAH!" came large shouts mixed with barking.

"What is that?" Tigerstripe asked, annoyed by the tone of whatever dog or animal was making noise. He had begun to become nervous and was hoping that they would leave shortly and find a safer place to wander.

The voices seemed to be growing louder and coming closer, and Tigerstripe watched as Flamepaw jumped as they all heard, "Come on!"

"Should we check it out?" Dusty asked curiously, pointing his tail to where the sound had been coming from.

"Of course!" Krait answered quickly.

Tigerstripe rolled his eyes, knowing Krait always wanted to get involved in some sort of situation. But perhaps these dogs had information about Jetfur. It was a slim chance and risky, but maybe Tigerstripe's prayers had been answered after all.

"Yes, dear," Dusty muttered quietly, following Krait toward the sound. Tigerstripe followed behind with Barkpaw and Flamepaw, who, unlike Krait, did not seem very excited to check out what the strange noise was.

They came closer to some bushes, and Tigerstripe could now notice four canine figures peeking over the bushes. They were all speaking each other and seemed to be oblivious to the fact that the cats were nearby. Krait pulled Dusty inside some bushes, and Tigerstripe slowly followed behind with the two apprentices.

"We need to get away from these dogs," Tigerstripe told the others, knowing that they were in a dangerous situation. Sure, the dogs had not noticed them yet, but sooner or other, they would detect a new scent nearby.

"Maybe they're friendly," Barkpaw suggested.

Tigerstripe wanted to slap the tom on the side of his head with his paw. There was no such thing as a kind dog. But then again, hadn't he believed there wasn't such thing as a kind fox? Rain had surely proved him wrong.

"They don't seem to be bothering us," Tigerstripe told the others. "Let's just keep walking."
Krait's fur settled down a bit, and she nodded. "I guess you're right. Let's get out of here before they notice us."

Silently relieved, Tigerstripe exited out of the bushes with the other cats, glad to be gone from the dogs. They managed to escape without capturing the dogs' attention, and soon enough, they were on their way again, the barking noises slowly fading.

They walked a bit further until Krait suddenly turned her head to the right. Tigerstripe looked in her direction and was shocked to see the dogs running by only foxsteps away, taking no notice of the cats whatsoever.

"What are they running from?" Dusty wondered. He had now stopped in his tracks and was watching the dogs rush by.

"Whatever it is, I hope we don't get involved," Krait glumly replied.

They continued walking again, though Tigerstripe had begun to grow nervous, wondering why the dogs had not noticed them. He could still spot them in the distance, and he froze when one looked their way, locking its eyes on Krait, before Krait turned away.

Suddenly, Tigerstripe heard one of the dogs yelp and run clumsily in the distance.

Krait's eyes widened, and she gasped. "Did you see that?!"

Dusty nodded. "It was slightly out of the ordinary."

"*Slightly?"* Krait snapped, clearly annoyed. "What if that shooting thing hits us?"

Tigerstripe froze, wondering if hunters were nearby. He was immediately reminded of the encounter of the hunters with Rain, also making him wonder if his ginger-furred friend was nearby as well.

A powerful boom suddenly echoed through the forest, and Barkpaw shouted, "RUN!"

The cats immediately began to pick up their pace and rushed through the forest, running as fast as their legs could carry them. Dusty froze suddenly, and Tigerstripe was about to tell him to keep running when he realized Dusty had paused to watch one of the bigger dogs fall to the floor, obviously hit by whatever weapon had been used against it.

"DON'T JUST STAND THERE LIKE A MOUSEBRAIN!" Krait shouted at him. "RUN, DUSTY, RUN!"

Dusty shook his head slightly, coming out of his daze, and soon he had caught up to the rest of the cats again.

"I THINK THAT DOG IS HAVING KITS!" he shouted as they continued their race through the forest.

"IT'S NONE OF OUR CONCERN!" Krait shouted, her legs still moving without cease.

"Don't you mean pups?" Tigerstripe asked him.

Dusty gave a quick nod, and another large boom echoed behind them.

"RUN!" Tigerstripe shouted. He quickened his pace, taking the lead now. The cats struggled to keep up, but somehow, they managed.

As they raced through the forest, a few two-legs suddenly burst out of the bushes, fire-sticks held in their weirdly shaped paws.

Tigerstripe yowled in surprise and spun around, trying to flee from the two legs.

Racing away from the two-legs, Tigerstripe turned to see another group of two-legs had gone in the opposite direction after the dogs. Meanwhile, the other two-legs trailed close behind, and Tigerstripe gasped as one grabbed Dusty by the scruff. Dusty yowled and flailed his legs, but the two-leg held a good grasp.

Krait gasped and slowed down her pace. Hissing aggressively, she unsheathed her claws. On the other side of him, Flamepaw hissed at the hunter and turned toward him, biting down hard on his leg. The hunter yelped and dropped Dusty back to the forest floor.

Dusty landed with a thud and whirled around, bristling. Krait meanwhile slashed at the two-leg's other leg, causing blood to seep out and stain his pants. The fire-stick holder yowled with pain and clamped his paw on his leg. Another one clumsily almost dropped his fire-stick and staggering, aimed it at Krait.

Tigerstripe hissed and jumped on the two-leg who was aiming at Krait. He bit as leg just as Flamepaw had done, but it seemed he did not do it hard enough.

The two-leg screamed, but in that moment, still managed to shoot Krait. Krait yelped in complete and utter shock. The metal figure had implanted itself in her shoulder, and Tigerstripe watched in fear as blood began to soak her cream coat. Another two-leg hollered angrily at the one who had shot Krait, and Tigerstripe glanced at them in confusion.

Dusty ran over to his mate, shouting, "KRAIT! ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?!"

Krait, still in shock from the impact, managed to nod her head a little. Krait stared at her wounded shoulder, and Tigerstripe breathed in relief, glad she was still alive. Suddenly, a third two-leg who had been doing nothing pointed his fire-stick at Krait.

Tigerstripe and Barkpaw both lunged at the two-leg and bit down on his ankle, causing the two-leg to drop his heavy fire-stick on

Barkpaw's head. Meanwhile, Dusty was trying to stop Krait from bleeding any more.

Barkpaw fell to the ground, and Flamepaw immediately rushed to his side in worry.

"Barkpaw!" she called.

He slowly lifted his head, revealing a large bump. He got up slowly, shaking himself off.

"I-I'm okay," he managed to say.

The two-leg finally had his chance, and his fire-stick boomed as Krait was shot once more in the other shoulder.

"NO, KRAIT!" Dusty yowled painfully.

"KRAIT!" Tigerstripe yowled, running over to the fallen she-cat. His heart pounded with fear, and he knew already that there would be no hope for her. Tears began to gather in his eyes, and he wished he could've been able to prevent this from happening.

Krait was breathing heavily, and her eyes were slowly beginning to close. Memories of him and Krait flashed through Tigerstripe's mind, and he held back a sob, trying to remain strong in the face of one of his closest acquaintances.

"No, Krait!" Tigerstripe called, trying desperately to keep her alive. "We have to find Jetfur, remember?"

Krait shook her head. "C-Can't now," she said softly. "I will see you again in StarClan," she said to both Tigerstripe and Dusty. Tigerstripe found the statement odd, being that she was a rogue, but he simply pushed the thought away, overcome with grief. Krait's eyelids slid close, and Tigerstripe knew she was gone. Suddenly, one of the two-legs grabbed her, and before any cat had time to react, they'd thrown her into a cage.

"NO!" Tigerstripe screeched, staring at the two-legs wandering away in disbelief. He should've run after them and ripped them senseless with his claws, but his legs remained glued to the forest floor.

"I'm sorry," Flamepaw whispered quietly to Tigerstripe and Dusty.

"KRAIT, I CAN'T LOSE YOU!" Dusty shouted in disbelief. "WHY DID YOU HAVE TO DIE? WHY?!"

Tigerstripe was about to comfort Dusty when he turned, noticing that some two-legs were still present. And this time, there fire-sticks were pointed directly at the group of cats.

Chapter 25

Tigerstripe froze in fear, knowing that there was no way he would be saved by Rain this time. The hunter would most definitely kill him, and that would be the end of it. He would perish just as Krait did without even seeing Jetfur one last time.

Tigerstripe took a deep breath, ready to accept his death when one of the two-legs let out a yowl. A massive wolf leapt in front of one of the two-legs and knocked him over. The other two-legs were shocked, and they turned their gaze away from the cats and instead scrambled to shoot the large wolf.

The two-legs fired their fire-sticks poorly. Meanwhile, Tigerstripe glanced at the others. Each of them held an expression of absolute shock. Why had this wolf saved their lives?

Suddenly, one of the bullets hit the wolf's shoulder, and the large wolf tumbled down to the forest floor, moaning in pain. As soon as he hit the floor, a small black puppy fled out of the bushes, running toward the fallen wolf.

"HE'S HURT!" Flamepaw shouted toward the others.

"Hurt?" asked Dusty. Dusty clumsily ran toward the wolf, Tigerstripe and the others following behind him. Dusty held an intense gaze on the wolf. Tigerstripe, meanwhile, kept an eye on the two-legs who seemed to have regained their senses.

The small puppy leapt at one of the hunters and bit down on his foot, causing him to shriek. Meanwhile, the wolf slowly tried to make his way to his feet, but collapsed in failure. Tigerstripe grimaced, not enjoying the image of the wolf in pain.

The two-leg finally managed to shake the puppy off, and he and the other two-legs at last ran away, leaving all of the animals alone. Tigerstripe let out a deep breath. They were finally safe, but at what

price? Krait was dead, and now this poor wolf would surely die too.

The wolf managed to make his way to his feet, and this time, he stood firmly, despite the terrible wincing faces he was making. The young puppy rushed to his side and began helping him walk through the same bushes she had emerged.

Flamepaw suddenly began following alongside the wolf. Tigerstripe shot her an odd glance, but Barkpaw was already following her, and so he was forced to give in and chase after them.

Tigerstripe awkwardly trotted behind the injured wolf, wondering if he would kill them as soon as he got the chance. Tigerstripe had been lucky with Rain, but with a full-grown wolf? He wasn't so sure.

"Thank you for saving us," Flamepaw told the wolf.

"You're welcome," the wolf replied weakly.

"You helped us, now we help you!" Dusty exclaimed, calling the others to walk alongside the wolf.

They slowly made their way through the dense bushes that the wolf and dog had seemed to emerge from. As Tigerstripe descended into the bushes, he emerged on the other side, shocked to see another black puppy almost identical to the other and a pure white wolf with five suckling pups pushed against her. They seemed to have been newly born.

"Are the pups okay?" the injured wolf asked desperately.

"Lupin, you're hurt!" the white she-wolf exclaimed. He padded over to her side, and she immediately began licking his wounds with her soft pink tongue.

"Your name is Lupin?" Flamepaw asked the male wolf.

He nodded slowly.

"Lupin, who are these cats?" the she-wolf asked oddly.

"Lupin risked his life for them!" the puppy who had driven off the two-legs answered.

The she-wolf raised an eyebrow. "You always must save them, must you?"

"I couldn't save Seven. I-I wanted to save someone," she heard Lupin mutter.

Tigerstripe tilted his head, having no idea who Seven was. He was just surprised none of these dogs or wolves had launched their fangs into his neck.

"Lupin was very brave," Barkpaw spoke up at last, his head still a bit swollen from the fire-stick dropping on his head.

"Why don't we introduce ourselves?" Dusty suggested.

"Why?" Tigerstripe growled. "We've made the introduction. Now we must head on our way."

"But Lupin's hurt," Flamepaw argued. "We should help him first. He did save our lives, you know."

Tigerstripe shot her a glare but knew in his heart that she was correct. He sighed and said no more, obeying her request.

"My name is Lupin, but you already know that," the injured wolf explained, laying back down and licking his shoulder. "This is my mate, Breeze."

The beautiful white wolf dipped her head. "How do you do?"

"Fine, thank you," Flamepaw replied. "Your pups look brand new, Breeze."

"They were born only minutes ago," she explained. "That's why we couldn't flee completely. I couldn't move when I knew they were going to be born at any minute."

"They're beautiful," Dusty purred.

"I'm Holly!" one of the black puppies squeaked. "And that's my sister, Rose," she said, pointing to the other puppy. "We're purebred Newfoundland dogs!"

Tigerstripe was unsure of what being a purebred dog meant or what she had just defined her and her sister as, but he supposed it would be fine to just go along with it. He had gone through enough already during that day.

"My name is Flamepaw," Flamepaw explained. "And this is Barkpaw," she said, pointing to her tabby friend. "And then there's Dusty," she said, her tail pointing to the gray tom, "and lastly, Tigerstripe," she said.

"We're very grateful to you for saving our lives," Barkpaw explained, dipping his head.

"What's on your head, dear?" Breeze asked.

"Got hit by a firestick, but I'm feeling better," Barkpaw argued.

Lupin stared at Dusty. "I'm sorry I couldn't save your she-cat friend."

At the mention of Krait, Tigerstripe glanced awkwardly down at his paws, holding back tears. He still was not fully aware of the fact that Krait really was gone. He almost imagined her popping out of the bushes at that moment, exclaiming how it was all a joke and she was really alive. He knew, of course, this would never be true.

"Well, we promise to help you until you get better, Lupin," Flamepaw proposed.

"You cats have odd names," Rose barked.

"Some of us are clan cats," Flamepaw explained. "Have you heard of a clan called RiverClan or seen any nearby?"

All dogs and wolves shook their heads.

"Beats me. Never heard of it," Lupin muttered. Tigerstripe eyed the wolf, noticing how he was holding back as much as pain as he could in his voice. Tigerstripe knew he was suffering much more

than he was letting on.

Remembering the violent acts of the two-legs, Tigerstripe shuddered and spoke up. "I hate to ruin the fun, but we should probably get out of here to somewhere safer. The two-legs may come back, and when they do, they'll be prepared this time."

Dusty nodded beside him, his eyes glimmering with tears.

"I agree," Breeze said, nodding. "But my pups aren't strong enough yet to be moved. And how could we possibly carry Lupin?"

"I can stand up," Lupin growled, trying to rise to his feet. Within a few seconds, however, he was back on the ground, licking away at his wound.

Breeze frowned and glanced at her large white paws. "I might be able to carry one or two pups, but how would you all carry the others? I don't think you cats would be able to carry a full-grown wolf."

"You got us there," Barkpaw sighed.

"There's got to be something we can do!" Dusty argued.

"I wish we had a medicine cat with us," Flamepaw sighed. "I used to help out Mothwing in the medicine cat den sometimes, but I don't know much about herbs, and I certainly don't know anything about treating a wound like that," she explained, pointing to the deep, bloody wound in Lupin's shoulder.

"Well, there's got to be something we can do," Tigerstripe explained. "We can't just very well leave him like this. That wound will kill him eventually."

Breeze gasped, but Lupin sighed, glancing down in defeat.

"We'll-we'll think of something," Flamepaw stuttered. Tigerstripe knew the she-cat was trying her hardest, but he wondered if perhaps she was trying too hard. Yes, Lupin had saved their lives, but did they really have to repay him this way?

"MOUSEBRAINS!" came a shout from the bushes.

Tigerstripe froze, at first believing the voice to be Krait's. He knew as soon as he heard, it however, it was not her and instead belonged to some unknown she-cat.

Tigerstripe watched suddenly as a cat tumbled out of the bushes, knocking into Flamepaw and throwing her to the ground. Flamepaw fell to the ground and stood up angrily, growling at the unknown she-cat.

"HEY! WATCH IT!" she shouted angrily. Tigerstripe had never heard her speak in such an infuriating tone before. "WHO ARE YOU?!"

The unknown she-cat at the same time was regaining her senses, and as soon as her eyes fell on Flamepaw, Tigerstripe noticed that both of the cats froze.

"Mothwing?!" Flamepaw gasped.

Chapter 26

Tigerstripe watched as Flamepaw and the unknown she-cat locked eyes. Obviously Flamepaw knew very well who the she-cat was, and Tigerstripe only hoped she wasn't an enemy.

"Flamepaw?" Mothwing gasped, her eyes widened with the same excitement and confusion. "What are you doing way out here?"

"Oh, it was terrible, Mothwing!" Flamepaw exclaimed. "Barkpaw and I accidentally fell asleep in the forest while...um, hunting, and when we returned, the entire clan had disappeared! So we joined Tigerstripe, Dusty, and Kr—" She paused.

Tigerstripe glanced down, saddened to hear his deceased friend's name. Flamepaw cleared her throat and glanced at both Tigerstripe and Dusty.

"Tigerstripe and Dusty. Tigerstripe was looking for a black cat named Jetfur, and Dusty was on the search for his kits. And just recently we were attacked by hunters, but this wolf saved us," she said, gesturing to Lupin.

Mothwing glanced at the injured wolf, bewildered for a moment, before turning back to Flamepaw. She let out a long sigh and sat back down, her eyes fixed on Flamepaw's.

"Is that so?" she wondered quietly.

Both Flamepaw and Barkpaw nodded slowly.

"Well," she continued, "it just so happens that I know where the clan is."

Both Flamepaw and Barkpaw exchanged looks of excitement, and Flamepaw's face spread into a wide smile. She leapt up and down with excitement.

Tigerstripe tried to be happy for them, but he could not hide his disappointment. Why was it that Barkpaw and Flamepaw were so lucky to find their clan so soon when he had heard nothing of Jetfur in moons?

"YOU DO?! WHERE ARE THEY?!" Flamepaw shouted excitedly.

Tigerstripe flinched, the high-pitched squeal piercing his ears.

The medicine cat sighed, and Tigerstripe suddenly grew interested, wondering if perhaps it wasn't all sunhine and rainbows for the two apprentices.

"It all happened so suddenly," she began. "The same night you and Barkpaw were in the woods, this mucky colored tom who called himself 'Swampstar,' I believe." She paused, then nodded. "Yes, yes, it was Swampstar. He came with many of his clanmates to our clan. At first, we believed it to be the whole clan because there were so many, but apparently this was only a portion of his clan.

"Swampstar had begun a new clan named SwampClan, and though he seemed to have many members with him, he desired more. We were easily outnumbered, and he demanded that Goldstar and the rest of RiverClan join his clan. Goldstar, StarClan praise her, obviously refused. But then he mentioned how his clan was going to be killed because of...some other clan. I forgot the name. Of course, Goldstar still refused, claiming that it was none of RiverClan's business and that he should deal with his own problems.

"But then Swampstar really hit her hard. He said he would kill each and every cat, including her, if she did not come. And he was serious, Flamepaw. I could see the wild look in his eyes. Goldstar had no choice but to accept, and we were whisked away by SwampClan," Mothwing explained.

Both Flamepaw and Barkpaw sat for a moment, dumbfounded, when Flamepaw suddenly cried out, exasperated.

"NO!" she gasped, seeing how unfair it all was. "SHE JOINED AN EVIL CLAN?!"

Tigerstripe felt his heart sink slightly for the two, knowing a thing or two about evil clans and their dominance over other clans.

"I AM *NOT* JOINING AN EVIL CLAN!" Flamepaw declared. Barkpaw touched her shoulder lightly with his tail, and Tigerstripe watched as her fur slowly settled down.

"That's exactly what I thought," Mothwing agreed. "I tried to sneak away, but a patrol caught me. They started chasing me, and I eventually managed to outrun them. And then, I ran into you."

Tigerstripe watched as Flamepaw smiled weakly, but he could obviously detect sadness and frustration in her gaze.

Mothwing suddenly turned toward Lupin and gasped, as if she had not noticed him earlier.

"Oh, StarClan! What a sight!" she exclaimed. "I mean, no offense, but you look terrible!"

"He was shot by some hunters," Breeze explained. "He is badly injured, and I don't know how we can move him and my newborn pups." Her eyes then widened suddenly. "Oh, I forgot to name them!"

Mothwing whirled around to the white wolf, exclaiming, "You had puppies?! Oh, dear. Are they all right?"

Breeze nodded. "Perfectly fine," she explained, glancing down at the sleeping pups. "The hunters did not bother me at all. Holly and Rose here protected me."

Rose and Holly both nodded and stood proudly, puffing out their fluffy chests.

"Go on and name them!" Rose barked.

Breeze smiled. "Well, all right," she said, turning her gaze to Lupin.

Lupin smiled weakly in response. "Go ahead, Breeze. Name them."

Breeze smiled, glancing down at one of the larger pups, a white

male. "This will be Blizzard," she decided. She then turned to the other white pup, a female. "And this will be Cloud." She then turned her gaze toward the largest female wolf with timber markings. "This will be Dapple." She turned her gaze to another female wolf with timber markings, those her markings were a bit more red-like. "And this will be Squirrel."

Lastly, she turned her gaze to a male pup that resembled Lupin the best. She grinned, and then slowly said, "And this will be...Seven." Both Rose and Holly whimpered, and Tigerstripe wondered what was the importance of this last name.

"Seven? What an interesting name," Mothwing remarked. She then went over to Lupin and immediately began inspecting his wound.

"This looks bad," she admitted, coming closer to get a better look. "What is that? A rock?" she asked, confused.

"I believe the two-legs called it a bullet," he explained.

"Well, whatever you call it, it must come out," Mothwing said. She gently grabbed the bullet between her sharp teeth and yanked it out, causing Lupin to let a loud yowl. His yowl was so loud, one of his sleeping pups awoke and began to whimper quietly. He immediately began licking his wound, wincing at the pain.

Mothwing spat the object out and immediately turned toward the others.

"I need something to heal this wound!" she exclaimed. She gazed around quickly until her eyes fell on a patch of yellow flowers. She then shouted, "Yes!"

"Marigold?" Flamepaw wondered. Tigerstripe wasn't sure how Flamepaw had an extensive knowledge of herbs. He knew nothing at all about healing.

"No," Mothwing sighed, approaching the flowers. "It would be nice though. I guess tormentil will have to do." Leaning down toward the flowers, she pulled out a few and ripped the roots off. Meanwhile, Lupin was still sighing in pain.

Mothwing began chewing up the roots. Tigerstripe watched her, now somewhat glad to have a medicine cat with him. If they were to run into the hunters again, at least they'd have a cat who knew how to heal.

As soon as the roots were chewed up, Mothwing came back over to Lupin. Slowly, she began applying the paste to his wound, spreading it very carefully. Mothwing applied the remedy, and Lupin let out a low growl.

Tigerstripe stiffened, frightened that Lupin might now choose to lash out at the cats. But his growl soon faded, and Tigerstripe dismissed these thoughts. The medicine cat had hesitated a bit at Lupin's unexpected growl, but she finished her work, stepping away and grinning slightly.

"There," she announced. "Now all I need is something to cover this." She paused and thought for a moment. "Like cobweb." The calico sighed and lowered her head, shaking it slowly. "Now would be the time for that to fall out of the sky."

Lupin growled, obviously still in pain.

"Oh, hush," Mothwing snapped at him. "Let's see," she said, pacing back and forth. "They are usually found in small places, preferably in nooks and crannies. Oh, I better go get some!"

Tigerstripe watched as Flamepaw's eyes suddenly lit up.

"I can help you find some, Mothwing," she suggested.

"That would be lovely, Flamepaw. Thank you," Mothwing replied.

Barkpaw placed his tail on Flamepaw's shoulder.

"Are you sure you want to be alone out there?" he asked. "It seems Swampstar is after Mothwing, and if they find you..."

As Barkpaw spoke softly to her, Tigerstripe felt a pang of sorrow for Jetfur, wishing he could talk to her that way. He froze, reminding himself that Jetfur and him were only friends and that she might not even want to see him again if he found her.

The two continued talking to each other quietly while Tigerstripe blocked their conversation and laid down, tired from running from the hunters. He watched as Flamepaw and Mothwing left to venture further into the forest for cobwebs.

As they left, he let out a deep sigh and let his thoughts about Jetfur and Krait take over his mind.

Chapter 27

While Flamepaw and Mothwing remained gone in search of cobwebs, Tigerstripe attempted to sleep. He had hoped a mid-day nap would soothe him, but it was hard to quiet his thoughts, especially with Krait's death flashing in his mind again and again. The sleep he was able to fall into was restless and short, and while awaking from yet another failed attempt at sleep, he let out a groan.

Tigerstripe glanced around, watching the others napping or talking quietly among themselves. Lupin seemed to be in less pain, but he at times let out a low growl. Tigerstripe still worried that the wolf was unsafe.

Tigerstripe rested his head on his paws, trying to fall back into sleep, when a faint sound came from behind him.

"Cat!" it called faintly.

Tigerstripe jolted upright, frightened. He glanced around, but saw no one. Curious, he headed through the bushes, wondering where the sound had come from. Dusty caught his glance and followed him.

"Hello?" Tigerstripe called as he padded through the bushes, glancing around. Suddenly, he froze, his eyes fixated on the sight before him.

In the distance, there were two-legs carrying various cages. One carried a dog, others some badgers. All the animals inside, however, appeared not to be moving. Were they all dead?

Amongst the animals, Tigerstripe could recognized the auburn coat of a fox.

"Cat!" came the faint call again.

Tigerstripe paused, realizing the sound had echoed from the caged fox's mouth. Tigerstripe paused for a moment, wondering why the poor animal was calling to him, when he suddenly recognized the fox's voice. It was Rain!

His heart leapt with anticipation, and he let out a shout, "Rain!" Suddenly, his legs began to move from under him, and he was off and running toward his trapped friend.

Dusty ran after him, completely confused.

"Who's Rain? Where are you going?" he called.

Tigerstripe ignored Dusty and kept on pursuing Rain until he arrived at the cage. Hers had not been taken yet, and it seemed the two-legs had not returned to fetch them yet. He came to a pause at the gate and fixated his gaze on Rain.

"Cat!" she exclaimed joyfully. In the few moons she'd been gone, Tigerstripe was surprised to see how much different she looked. She seemed to be fully grown now and much larger than Tigerstripe.

"Get down! They'll see you!" she whispered.

Tigerstripe paused and glanced over, noticing the two-legs had returned. The two-legs, however, did not seem to notice Tigerstripe as his pelt seemed to blend in with the bushes. Still, Tigerstripe didn't want to endanger Rain any more, and so he slowly crept down in the bushes, Dusty doing the same. Rain, meanwhile, watched helplessly through her cage.

As one two-leg grasped its hand around the candle of her cage, Tigerstripe couldn't take it anymore and launched at the two-leg. Dusty made a move to stop him, but it was too late. As Tigerstripe's claws sliced into the two-leg's thigh, the two-leg stumbled and threw the cage to the side. Rain shrieked and was slammed to the side of her cage as it began to roll away.

Tigerstripe ran after Rain, watching as the cage slowly descended down a hill. With a leap of faith, he leapt in front of the cage and let it hit him. He fell to the ground with a thud, and his entire body

ached, but upon glancing up, he noticed the cage had slowly come to a standstill.

Dusty finally jumped out of the bushes to help. He unsheathed his claws and bristled, hissed, and spat. One two-leg, frightened by his demonic appearance, bumped into another, causing both of the two-legs to clumsily fall to the ground. Meanwhile, Rain clawed furiously at her cage in an attempt to escape.

Tigerstripe rushed to the cage and did the same, clawing at it with all his might.

"We have to get Rain out!" Tigerstripe called to him.

Dusty stared back at him with a look of confusion. He was probably not so keen on helping a fox escape. Still, Dusty ran up to him in an attempt to assist him and the fox.

"That object there is called a lock," Dusty called as he inspected the cage. "Try to push up the latch!" he yelled as he headed back to the two-legs to distract them.

"What's a latch?" Rain yipped, panicking.

Tigerstripe gazed at the odd "lock" that Dusty had pointed out. He began clawing at it, and after a few seconds of clawing, there came a sound of a click, and the cage doors opened. Rain immediately broke free and dashed off, leaving Tigerstripe behind.

A moment later, she skidded to a halt and spun around, apparently forgetting about Tigerstripe.

"Let's go! Before the two-legs trap us again!"

Tigerstripe nodded and broke into a run. Dusty quickly followed, and soon, all three were running together. As they ran and slowly left the two-legs behind, Rain murmured, "I missed you..." Tigerstripe was felt with an incredible sense of guilt as he sensed the sorrow in the she-fox's words.

Unsure how to reply, he kept running. Once the two-legs were out of sight, they all came to a halt and began to walk.

"Did you find the cat?" Rain asked.

Tigerstripe shook his head, despair filling his body. At least he had found Rain...He froze suddenly, making an incredible realization.

"RAIN, YOU'RE TALKING NORMAL!" he exclaimed out of nowhere.

Dusty sat down, apparently interested in their conversation. He hadn't spoken since the escape, appearing to realize how important the two were to each other.

Rain blinked, as if she couldn't tell a difference.

"Oh, yes. I never was fully able to master and understand cat. But after we got separated, I ran into someone who taught me to better speak in cat. I never thought it'd come in handy again though."

"Did you see Jetfur anywhere?" Tigerstripe asked.

Rain shook her head, but something appeared to cloud her eyes.

"Are you sure?" Tigerstripe asked, wanting to make sure every detail was accounted for.

"Yes, I'm sure," she replied, her voice shaking slightly, probably from all the adrenaline.

"Excuse me, but I'd like to know how you know each other," Dusty spoke at last.

"Um, well, on my search for Jetfur, Rain found me as a kit and followed me everywhere. We got separated a few moons ago...before I ran into Krait. Well, maybe I left..."

"Who is Krait? Is she another fox?" Rain asked, somewhat panicked.

Both Dusty and Tigerstripe exchanged sorrowful glances, and Tigerstripe sadly shook his head.

"No, she's just a cat."

Dusty cleared his throat, attempting to break up the awkward

conversation. "Maybe we should get back to the others."

Tigerstripe nodded. "Come on, Rain," he called.

The she-fox nodded, though her thoughts appeared to be already occupied. Tigerstripe and Dusty led the way, and once they were finally able to find their way back and get on the right track, it was already becoming dark.

Padding through the familiar bushes, Tigerstripe found the wolves still there as well as Flamepaw, Barkpaw, and Mothwing, who all seemed to be involved in a panicked conversation.

"A fox!" Flamepaw shrieked, her eyes falling on Rain. "Hurry, let's attack now!"

Tigerstripe bristled, snapping, "Woah, wait!" Flamepaw became very still as if she were more frightened of him than Rain.

"Tigerstripe, that's a fox," Barkpaw observed.

"I'm aware of what she is. This is Rain," he announced.

"You...know her?" Flamepaw asked.

"Yes," Tigerstripe replied. "It's strange, I know, but we've been close friends since she was a small fox kit. She's grown a bit, I guess. She's completely harmless, I assure you."

"Nice to meet you," Rain said, dipping her head.

"I'm going to bed," Flamepaw sighed, looking exhausted. "We'll...figure this out tomorrow.

"Good. I'm exhausted," Dusty exclaimed, letting out a large yawn.

Tired and exhausted, Tigerstripe padded over to them and laid on the cool ground. He flexed his claws and felt the earth beneath him, then closed his eyes to sleep.

Rain padded over next to him and curled up beside him, similar to how she had done moons before as a young kit. Tigerstripe smiled

slightly, glad to have her back with him. And she appeared not to be upset about his absence either.

Warmed by Rain's fur, Tigerstripe soon found himself drifting into a real sleep, the tired snores of Dusty on the other side of him fading into nothingness.

Chapter 28

Tigerstripe slowly opened his eyes and let out a yawn, glancing around the sunlit hollow. Some of the others were already stirring, though a few cats and wolves still slept soundly. Tigerstripe turned and found Rain still curled beside him, her chest slowly rising and falling with each breath.

He smiled weakly, glad to have her with him again. It had been awful lonely without Rain, even with Dusty, and he hoped she would continue to aid him on his journey to find Jetfur.

Tigerstripe laid contently for just a little while longer until Rain suddenly stirred. She jerked awake, her eyes wild. She was breathing heavily and glanced around quickly.

"Are you okay?" Tigerstripe immediately asked Rain, taken aback.

"Yes, of course," she assured him, her breaths becoming more stable now and no longer as rapid. "It was just a ye—nightmare."

"Okay then," Tigerstripe replied oddly. He tilted his head, wondering what the fox had dreamt of that had frightened her.

Slowly, all of the other animals woke up and regained their senses, now fully rested and recovered from the exciting events that had occurred the day before.

Mothwing meanwhile had moved over toward Lupin in order to inspect his wounds. After her inspection was complete, Lupin spoke up.

"I'm not sure it's safe for all of us to be out in the open," he explained. "We should find some real shelter, just in case the hunters return. We can transport the pups there."

"But you're still weak," Flamepaw told him, his wounds clearly contrasting with his fur. "We need to wait until you heal."

Mothwing sat up and stared at Lupin. "Not a budge from you!" she warned. "It would only make you less weak!"

Lupin shrunk back down, clearly disappointed.

"Flamepaw and Mothwing are right, dear," Breeze replied, licking her mate's ear. "You're still too weak, and the pups are far too young. If we haven't been bothered by now, I don't think we will be again."

"Do you hear something?" Rain suddenly interrupted, pricking her ears.

Tigerstripe pricked his ears, but heard no sound.

"I don't hear anything," Tigerstripe told her.

Rain was beginning to look as frightened as she had when she first awoke, and she shrunk down, murmuring quietly, "Are you really sure?"

"No one hears anything, do they?" Flamepaw asked.

All of the others nodded, trying to calm the worried fox.

Dusty shrugged and turned toward Rain. "It must just be in your head."

Rain nodded, though she still held a worried gaze. "Yes, I suppo—"

"Well, good afternoon," came a sweet voice.

Tigerstripe jumped in surprise. Rain spun around, looking for where the sound had come from, Dusty doing the same.

"Up here, silly," came the voice again.

Tigerstripe glanced up with the rest and found a sleek white she-cat laying regally on a branch, picking at a leaf. Her blood red eyes shot down on the other cats, and she grinned maliciously. Tigerstripe shuddered at her appearance, his fur standing on end.

"Um, hi?" Tigerstripe spoke up while the others appeared to be in total, shocked silence.

The she-cat then turned her gaze on Flamepaw and stared at her intensely.

"Say, I know you," she purred. She leapt down from the tree and landed on the ground.

Tigerstripe watched as the she-cat stopped in front of the ginger tabby and snickered, "Do you remember me?"

Flamepaw unsheathed her claws and spat, "Korosu!"

"Koro-what?" Dusty asked, clearly confused.

Korosu flicked her long feathered tail at Flamepaw's sharp unsheathed claws.

"Settle down, kitty. I have worse things to worry about," she told her.

"LEAVE ME ALONE!" Flamepaw hissed.

Tigerstripe glanced around, utterly confused about what was going on. Obviously Flamepaw was well acquainted with this she-cat, though it appeared they weren't on the best terms with each other.

"Don't get your tail in a twist, honey," Korosu purred, her voice calm and smooth. Flamepaw remained frozen while Korosu continued to speak.

"I am not going to hurt you," she told Flamepaw. "But your clan kitties are not in such a good situation at this time."

Tigerstripe frowned, unhappy to hear that Flamepaw's clan wasn't doing so well. He knew how important finding RiverClan was for Flamepaw and Barkpaw.

"You always hurt my friends, Korosu!" Flamepaw snapped. "And it won't happen this time!"

Korosu appeared taken aback by this comment, and Tigerstripe watched as her expression immediately changed.

"Fine. Have it your way," Korosu hissed quietly. "Let your friends be killed if you don't think I would let you know where you are."

Tigerstripe slowly began to calm down, guessing the she-cat would be on her way now. Instead, she turned toward Tigerstripe, her red eyes gleaming into his soul.

"And you, dear, you can keep looking for your precious little Jetfur, but you have no idea what I know." She then sat down and curled her tail around her body.

"How do you know about Jetfur?" Tigerstripe hissed, unsheathing his claws.

"What do you know that's so special?" Flamepaw wondered beside Tigerstripe.

"Five, four, three." Korosu appeared to be counting down to something. "Two...One." All of them glanced around, expecting something to happen, but nothing did. "If you want to know where your heart's desire is, then follow me. Take it or leave it."

"What do you mean by my heart's desire?" Flamepaw asked.

"I know where your river cats are," she told Flamepaw. Then she turned to Tigerstripe and grinned at him with the same malicious smile. "And Jetfur." Tigerstripe felt his heart suddenly leap.

"I already know where my clan is!" Flamepaw spat. "You're not fooling me!"

Tigerstripe, meanwhile, pricked his ears, suddenly interested in what Korosu had to say. He didn't trust her, but she knew about Jetfur, and he wasn't sure when he'd hear about Jetfur again. Besides, he had grown up in a clan with untrustworthy and malicious cats. Surely she wasn't that different.

"You know where Jetfur is? I'm coming!" he exclaimed.

Flamepaw stared at Tigerstripe in disbelief. "What are you doing?" she gasped. "Don't trust her!"

Tigerstripe glanced at Flamepaw, feeling guilty for somewhat betraying her this way, but he had to find Jetfur. It was the most important thing in his life right now.

"But what if she's not lying?" he said quietly. He then glanced back up at the she-cat. "I'm coming, Korosu."

Korosu grinned and then turned back to Flamepaw. "No, you don't know where your clan cats are, silly kitty."

"I do! I know where Swampstar's clan is!" Mothwing spat back at Korosu.

"Oh, they're not there right now," Korosu explained. "I thought you'd be concerned about how many cats are dying. And your leader, of course." Her face then took on one of fake shock, and she said loudly, "Oops! Cat's out of the bag!"

Tigerstripe tried to look away as Flamepaw's expression turned to one of horror and pain.

"I'll find my way without you!" Flamepaw hissed.

"Where's Jetfur?" asked Tigerstripe, hoping the deal still stood.

"Follow," Korosu told Tigerstripe. Suddenly, she took off running. Tigerstripe hesitated for one moment and glanced back at the others, wondering if this truly was the right decision.

But I have to find Jetfur, he reminded himself. *Dusty will be fine on his own, the wolves will recover, and those RiverClan cats will find their clan eventually.*

He smiled weakly at them and took off after the pale white she-cat, running as fast as his legs could carry him. He heard footsteps trailing behind him and turned to see Rain rushing by his side.

"Rain, where are you going?!" Dusty shouted.

"I want to follow Tigerstripe!" she announced.

Rain turned toward Tigerstripe and smiled weakly.

"Thank you for coming," Tigerstripe spoke quietly.

She nodded, and together, they silently ran side by side to wherever Korosu was leading them to.

Please, let her take me to Jetfur, he prayed.

Chapter 29

Tigerstripe and Rain closely followed Korosu for the remainder of the day. Both Tigerstripe and Rain had remained mostly silent since they had gone off after the feline, and with each passing minute, Tigerstripe got more and more anxious to see Jetfur again.

Rain seemed rather nervous about the whole ordeal, which Tigerstripe couldn't blame. He didn't think Korosu was the most trustworthy cat ever, but she had been the only cat who had any idea about Jetfur's whereabouts, and he wasn't going to wait around several moons to find her another way.

Still, Tigerstripe felt slightly guilty about leaving the others behind. He hoped that Flamepaw and Barkpaw would find out some solution to their clan. And he hoped Dusty would be able to recover from Krait's death and maybe even find their lost kits.

Tigerstripe was glad to have Rain beside him though. He knew she didn't seem comfortable following Korosu, but she had come anyway. Tigerstripe hoped she would stick around awhile longer. Rain had been one of the best friends he'd made on this journey.

It was starting to get into late afternoon when Korosu's pace began to slow down. Tigerstripe was glad too, for he and Rain had been following her at a fast pace for quite a while, and his muscles were beginning to ache. Still, the thought of seeing Jetfur again gave him the energy to continue.

"Almost there!" Korosu announced as they headed up a large hill. Tigerstripe groaned at the sight of the hill but followed close behind. As they came closer, he found Rain pricking her ears, obviously hearing something.

Before Tigerstripe could ask what it was she was hearing, he began to hear a sound coming too. The closer they came to the top of the hill, the clearer the sound became. Tigerstripe could hear the

caterwauling and screeches of cats down below.

Finally, they came to a pause at the top of the hill, and Tigerstripe glanced down below, finding armies of cats engaged in battle in a clearing in the forest. He glanced around, confused. He gasped, recognizing some of the cats in the army. It appeared to be SnowClan engaged in some other battle. His old clan, MoonClan, had been defeated by SnowClan moons prior. He had not expected to stumble upon the clan again or its territory that was so near to his past clan's.

"Your Jetfur is somewhere among that commotion," Korosu explained when it appeared Tigerstripe had taken in the entire scene. "Better jump in there before it gets real messy."

Tigerstripe's heart beat rapidly. Somewhere within those group of fighting cats was Jetfur. Before Tigerstripe could contain himself, he sprang forward. Rain dipped her head in respect toward Korosu and took off after him.

"I'm going to see Jetfur again!" he exclaimed to Rain as he rushed down the hill toward the fighting cats. He let out yowls of excitement and leapt into battle, Rain following behind. He wasn't exactly sure what the battle was about or what was going on, but he knew he had to find Jetfur as quickly as possible. The last thing he needed was to find her injured on the battlefield.

"JETFUR! JETFUR!" he shouted within the crowd. He moved around, dodging cats left and right in an attempt to search for Jetfur. Unfortunately, swarms of fur surrounded him, and it was hard to distinguish between the cats. Rain seemed just as cluttered and confused, yet no cat really seemed to notice her.

"JETFUR, IT'S ME, TIGERSTRIPE!" he yowled at the top of his lungs, praying for some sort of response.

Something moved past to him, and he found himself face-to-face with an attacking cat. The cat launched at him with his claws unsheathed, throwing him to the ground. Tigerstripe grunted and with his strong muscles, he threw the cat off and continued deeper into the crowd, Rain struggling to follow behind.

More cats closed in, and eventually, he found himself separated from Rain.

Find Jetfur first, he told himself when he could no longer spot the fox. *She's your first priority.*

He moved farther into the crowd shouting Jetfur's name. He gasped as someone knocked into him. It was a ginger she-cat, and she furiously slashed at him with her claws. Tigerstripe let out a yowl of pain and slashed at her belly, pushing the she-cat off.

"I'm not on either side!" he hissed. "I'm just looking for something."

Before the she-cat could even respond, he ran off, glancing around for Jetfur.

"JETFUR! JETFUR!" he shouted desperately, his voice being drowned out by the violent shrieks of cats.

"Tigerstripe!" came the familiar shout of Rain. "Over here!"

Tigerstripe noticed Rain in the distance, and he frantically worked towards her, having detected the pain in her voice. Managing to work his way past the cats, he found Rain laying on her side, severely wounded. Four cats had her surrounded, ready to attack further. Before Tigerstripe could even help though, Rain weakly flicked her tail to two she-cats engaged in battle.

Tigerstripe turned, recognizing one of those she-cats as Jetfur.

Tigerstripe gasped and froze, not sure what to do. Both of them appeared to be in danger. He let out a groan and turned toward the four cats.

"GET OFF THE FOX!" he hissed, unsheathing his claws. He slashed at a few of them and ran towards Jetfur, pushing the cat who was pinning her down off of her.

"JETFUR!" Tigerstripe exclaimed.

Rain let out another painful shriek, still under attack. "Tigerstripe!" she cried. Tigerstripe turned to help but was barreled over by

another cat while the other she-cat resumed her position pinning Jetfur down.

"Hang on, Jetfur!" Tigerstripe called. He pushed the cat attacking him off and lunged at those attacking Rain. He did his best working them off, slashing his claws violently and yowling. When he had someone got her free, he turned to Rain.

"Rain, you need to get up and *run*!" he urged.

He watched as Rain managed to weakly stand and then he rushed back toward Jetfur, pushing the cat off of her. "Run, Jetfur!"

He turned, watching as Rain attempted to flee, barely dodging a cat that flew on her. Apparently both sides seemed to be battling against Rain. It seemed that foxes were a common enemy for them. Tigerstripe continued to see her attempt to flee and watched as she disappeared into the crowd. His heart beat rapidly, and he prayed she would make it out okay.

Suddenly, a cat shouted over the commotion, "Tigerstripe! You're here!"

Tigerstripe spun around, coming face-to-face with Jetfur for the first time in moons. Her eyes weren't as bright, wounds covered her body, and she, herself, seemed to be in a poor physical state, but Tigerstripe thought she looked as beautiful as ever.

"Yes, I came to find you!" he exclaimed. "I've been searching for moons!"

Before she could reply, her eyes widened. "LOOK OUT!" Tigerstripe spun around, finding a cat ready to claw his flank.

Tigerstripe jumped out of the way and rushed closer to Jetfur, now at her side.

"I thought I lost you forever," Jetfur admitted.

For a moment, it seemed time had stood still. The voices of the cats seemed to fade, and Tigerstripe could only hear Jetfur's voice.

"I never stopped looking," he told her. "At times, I thought about giving up, but I never could. I had to find you."

There was a glow of admiration for Tigerstripe in her emerald eyes, but soon the blocked out surroundings became real again, and Jetfur was knocked to the side by another cat.

"JETFUR!" he screeched, knocking the cat off of her. "Are you okay?" he asked, attempting to help her up.

The enemy cat, however, did not give up. He lunged, his teeth bared at Tigerstripe. Jetfur rushed to his side to help, but she was dragged back by another cat. Tigerstripe worked hard getting the enmy off of him and then ran to Jetfur once more. Jetfur was attacking her opponent furiously. Tigerstripe rushed to her side, only to be distracted by an odd voice.

"Ohhh, Tigey!" a mysterious voice mewed in a sing-song voice. He glanced around, recognizing the voice but not being able to put a distinct name or face ot it. He watched as Jetfur was being surrounded by several skinny cats.

He leapt toward them and begin fighting. The cats didn't seem to look battle prepared, but they were. They quickly fought off Jetfur and ran off with Jetfur. Jetfur struggled, trying to get free, but she had no choice. The skinny cats had formed a system and kept circling around her as she attempted to run. They bit and threatened her if she didn't' get a move on, and slowly but surely, they were leading her away from the battle ground.

"I'M COMING, JETFUR!" Tigerstripe shouted, taking off after them. "I WON'T LOSE YOU AGAIN!"

Chapter 30

Not wishing to see Jetfur fade from his sight again, he took off after the cats surrounding Jetfur. Due to their light weight, they moved pretty fast, and Tigerstripe had to race quickly in order to keep up with them. In fact, they were beginning to get out of sight.

Tigerstripe picked up his pace, ignoring the burning he felt in his legs. He had finally found Jetfur, and he wasn't about to lose her again. He ran harder, his legs moving quickly across the ground. Soon, he had reached the cats again.

"LET HER GO!" he hissed, his claws unsheathed.

A light orange tabby gave Tigerstripe a menacing look and just kept going with the other cats who were pushing Jetfur on. Tigerstripe, frustrated, let out a growl and continued to follow them.

They were deep within the woods now, the sounds of battle much behind them. Tigerstripe couldn't even hear the cries anymore. His mind flicked to Rain quickly, but then he focused it once again on Jetfur. Rain had escaped, or so he assumed.

The cats suddenly came to a halt near the cliffside of a river that ran between the clans. As they halted, Tigerstripe noticed that there were a menacing looking brown tabby tom waiting for them at the cliff with some other frightened cats by his side. Tigerstripe assumed they were prisoners too. There was a ginger she-cat, a white tom, a calico she-cat, and a gray tabby tom. Tigerstripe snuck up behind them and watched as the ginger she-cat caught both his gaze.

"Who are you?" she asked quietly.

"I'm Tigerstripe, and my friend Jetfur is being trapped by these cats," he replied, flicking his tail to the black she-cat.

The brown tabby tom did not seem concerned with Jetfur but instead focused his attention on the other prisoners already standing next to him.

"Come on now, Applewhisker," the tom said to the calico. Tigerstripe flicked up his ears, listening in on the conversation.

"Do you really think you could do that?" the tom asked.

The calico, Applewhisker, was near the cliff, staring down at the rushing water. She took a couple pawsteps back. The tom let out a laugh while Applewhisker hissed at him.

"I'm not coming with you, Swampstar, if that's what you think!" she hissed.

Swampstar. He must be the leader of one of these armies, Tigerstripe guessed.

Swampstar narrowed his eyes at Applewhisker. "Then I'll have to kill your friends," he simply replied.

The gray tabby tom unsheathed his claws and snarled at Swampstar. "At the moment, you're outnumbered!" he hissed.

Tigerstripe turned his attention to the thin cats who had captured Jetfur and watched as they slowly released her and disappeared into the bushes. Jetfur quickly rushed to Tigerstripe's side, her eyes widened with fear.

"Jetfur, are you okay?" Tigerstripe asked, concerned. She had some minor wounds, but appeared not to be gravely injured. She seemed more frightened than anything.

"JETFUR?" Swampstar suddenly exclaimed, overhearing Tigerstripe speaking. He shoved past the other cats and glared at Jetfur. "Yes, my plan has worked!" he shouted.

Tigerstripe immediately tensed up, knowing it was not good that the tom knew Jetfur's identity.

"What's going on?" the gray tabby tom demanded.

Tigerstripe glanced over at Jetfur, completely confused. Did she personally know Swampstar? He hadn't seen her moons after all.

"What plan?" he asked.

"He's going to kill you, sweetie," came a soft voice. Tigerstripe jumped and glanced up, recognizing Korosu sitting in a tree. Tigerstripe had no idea the she-cat had been so close. Suddenly he felt guilty, realizing Korosu hadn't been so kind to him after all. Flamepaw and the others had been right...

"Kill me? Why?" Jetfur demanded, seeming just as confused as Tigerstripe.

Tigerstripe stepped in front of Jetfur and unsheathed his claws.

"No one will be hurting anyone!" he hissed.

Korosu leapt down from the tree and purred softly, approaching the group of cats.

"Why do you want to kill her?" the ginger she-cat asked.

Korosu glanced around.

"You should go ahead and tell the story, deary," she chuckled.

Assuming Korosu meant Jetfur should tell, he turned to her. "What is it?" he asked.

"Actually, Tigey," Korosu interrupted. "I *was* referring to Swampstar...why he wants to kill Jetfur and all."

Tigerstripe let out a slight sigh of relief. It seemed Jetfur was innocent in those whole ordeal.

"Why do you want to kill Jetfur?" Tigerstripe hissed at Swampstar.

"Her mother killed my father!" he snarled.

"My mother wouldn't do that unless it were for a good reason," Jetfur mewed quietly.

"I...want...*revenge!"* Swampstar snarled. "I already killed her, and now it's going to be you!" He unsheathed his claws, approaching her. Jetfur stepped back in terror and remained frozen in disbelief.

"Y-You mean she's..."

"Dead!" he hissed. "And your sister!"

"I-I don't have a sister," Jetfur stammered.

He grinned maliciously. "Not anymore, you don't!"

The ginger she-cat had unsheathed her claws now, digging them into the ground. "I don't really know this cat," she said, glancing at Jetfur, "But you can't go out killing cats, Swampstar!" The gray tabby tom nodded beside her.

"You're out-numbered, Swampstar!" the gray tabby hissed, unsheathing his claws to fight.

Suddenly, a strange a cream colored she-cat emerged from the bushes. Her head hung low, and she made no eye contact with anyone. Tigerstripe couldn't tell what the she-cat looked like, but she seemed familiar almost.

As the she-cat approached, she finally looked up and opened her eyes. They appeared to be clouded with much pain and sorrow. Suddenly, her markings became familiar to Tigerstripe, and he gasped. It was Krait! She wasn't dead after all.

"I am sorry, Tigerstripe," was all she croaked.

Then, without warning, she leapt at Jetfur with such force that the black she-cat fell over the edge of the cliff into the river below. Jetfur let out a scream, though it became deafened with the rushing rapids. There was a terrifying splash, and the scream was cut short.

Krait watched Jetfur's descent silently while the others seemed to be absolutely speechless. It seemed like time had frozen, and Tigerstripe couldn't even move his legs.

Krait's eyes turned toward Tigerstripe. Suddenly, her amber eyes

seemed to glow with a horrible glram. A sudden breeze swept through the ears of the tabby tom, whispering a message woven in the wind that only he seemed to hear.

Beware the cat with the snake in her name. Listen to her if you may, but it would only cause you pain...

The prophecy rushed back to Tigerstripe's mind. A dark shadow seemed to loom over Krait, eventually floating in front of her. It was the cobra that terrorized Tigerstripe's dreams. It slithered, then broke into mere dust. Then, it seemed to form into a different snake —a striped one.

"Beware the cobra..."

It slithered, then vanished.

Tigerstripe stood there, knowing he was the only one who could see the vision. Time seemed to start moving again, and soon, Tigerstripe began to understand the reality of what had just happened.

Chapter 31

Tigerstripe stood in absolute horror, the horrifying screams of Jetfur still ringing in his ears. How could that have happened? Why did Krait betray him? Why did she throw her over the cliff?

As soon as Tigerstripe had regained his senses, he unsheathed his claws and glared at Krait.

"YOU!" he spat. Before the she-cat could even react he lunged at her. Krait made no move to knock him off, sorrow and hurt gleaming in her eyes. He raised his claw to hurt her, destroy her, kill her...but he could not do it.

He slowly laid down his claw and realized what a fool he was doing trying to kill Krait. Jetfur could very well be alive at the bottom of the cliff. Pushing Krait away, he glanced at the others and hurled himself over the cliff, releasing a yowl of surprise.

Wind rushed through his fur as he made his slow descent. He hit the water of the river hard and let out a yowl of pain. Immediately, he sunk into the water and surged back to the surface. His entire body ached, and he wouldn't be surprised if he'd broken a bone or two.

He pawed at the water, feeling his energy draining from him as the rapids rushed against him.

"Jetfur!" he called out with all his might, searching for a black body.

He continued to paw at the water but could not find his friend. She had appeared to vanished. Grave thoughts flooded his mind as he contemplated the idea that she might have perished with the fall.

Tigerstripe let out a growl, frustrated that everything had to go

wrong right when they had been reunited.

"J-Jetfur," he coughed, growing weaker each second.

His body was being pulled back and forth, slamming against the cliff walls. He kept his eyes open, trying to find the she-cat, but he could not see her.

As the water moved him down the river, he suddenly noticed a large rock peeking up from the rapids. He did his best to swim until he reached the rock. Then, he latched his claws onto the wet surface and heaved himself on top of the rock with all his might, shivering as his wet body became exposed to the cold.

"Jetfur!" he called out.

"Hello," came a quiet voice.

Tigerstripe glanced around but saw no cat. He had been sure he had heard someone speaking.

"Who is it?" Tigerstripe called out, growing weaker and weaker.

He heard a rustle behind him and spun around, finding a starry-feline shaped outline standing on the rock behind him. She gently laid her tail over his shoulders and gazed at him with warm eyes.

"You cannot stay searching for her beneath the cliffs," she warned.

"Who are you? What do you mean?" Tigerstripe asked, still looking around for Jetfur from the rock.

"I'm Daisyflower, the one who informed you of the prophecy."

Tigerstripe suddenly recognized the she-cat.

"I now come to tell you to escape these rock walls and return to the ground. You'll kill yourself if you keep going. The water is fierce today."

"But what about Jetfur?" Tigerstripe argued.

Daisyflower gently shut her eyes and shook her head slowly.

"NO!" Tigerstripe spat, not for a second believing that she had died. "I'm not leaving without Jetfur!"

Daisyflower just blinked silently and then faded. In that moment, the water had appeared calm, but with Daisyflower's departure, the river seemed to roar with rage again.

"JETFUR!" Tigerstripe hissed desperately.

Suddenly, a large rapid splashed against him and caused him to lose his balance. He was dragged down into the water. Tigerstripe rushed back up the surface, gasping for air. Slowly, he swam across the rushing waves and yanked his claws back on the rock. He heaved himself up once more and shook off his pelt.

He knew Daisyflower was right. He couldn't stay here forever. He was just about ready to pass out. Letting out a sigh, he leapt back into his water, using every bit of strength to claw his way through the tough river.

Suddenly, he was sucked under. He reemerged, shouting Jetfur's name, but there was no reply. In the distance, he could see land, and he swam with the waves until he reached shore. Slowly, he crawled onto the shore, heaving his body up onto the damp sand. He coughed vigorously, water spewing from his mouth. Then, he laid his head down on the sand and fell unconscious.

"Tigerstripe," a small voice came. Tigerstripe slowly opened his eyes, the world appearing blurry. It soon came into view, and he weakly called out, "Hello?"

"I-I tried," came the quiet voice.

Tigerstripe turned, noticing the voice coming from his right. He gasped, finding Rain laying nearby. He knew she was injured, and immediately guilt flowed through him.

Tigerstripe limped toward the injured fox, tears piercing his eyes.

"Wh-what do you mean?" he asked.

As he came closer to the fox, he noticed a long gash running along the side of her throat. She was still bleeding and looked awkward with her legs spread out and her head looking at him at an angle. Her eyes were still frozen in shock, staring at nothing. She didn't even glance up at Tigerstripe as she spoke.

"You never came," she murmured, not moving at all.

Tigerstripe wanted to tell her how sorry he was, how he hadn't meant it, but all that came out was, "You knowI had to find Jetfur."

"Yes, I know," Rain replied. "You love her..."

Tigerstripe froze, though he knew the young fox was right. He wouldn't have been going on such a quest to find her if he did not love her most greatly. Tigerstripe sighed and watched Rain, noticing her wince. Her breathing appeared to be uneasy as well.

"Rain, are you okay?" he asked, concerned.

"You must leave...Before they c-come back..." She stuttered at the last word and narrowed her eyes, as if she was starting to lose sight of the world.

"I'm not leaving with Jetfur."He paused, then glanced at the fox. "And you."

Rain made no reply, and Tigerstripe spun around, screeching, "JETFUR!"

"Snakepelt," Rain spoke up.

"Snakepelt?" Tigerstripe asked her.

"She was not the prophecy cat,"she whispered.

"What? What do you mean?"Tigerstripe wondered.

"She-she wasn't the bad cat with the snake in her name. You-you sent her away because you th-thought she was no good...Right?"

"Right."

"Krait...um..."

"Krait was the bad cat!"Tigerstripe gasped. How could he not have known before?! The cobra had even appeared after the horrible act she'd done to Jetfur.

Rain just blinked, knowing Tigerstripe had realized the truth. Tears ran down her face, and she forced herself to look up at the tom.

"Good-bye, Tigerstripe," she whispered.

Tigerstripe's heart began to beat rapidly, and tears gathered in his eyes. He shook the fox, shouting at her, "Rain! Rain!"

Her eyes stared dimly at the tabby. The light seemed to be fading from them with each passing moment.

"I love you, Tigerstripe," she whispered. Her words trailed off, and she laid there motionless, her eyes still half open.

"RAIN! NO!" he shouted, shoving her vigorously. "You can't leave me! No!"

But the young fox was gone and had departed from this life. Her eyes did not glow with any sign of life.

For a while, Tigerstripe sat there, sobbing into the fur of his dead friend. He had foolishly left Rain behind, and she had paid the price. Guilt swarmed him. Guilt for Rain, guilt for ditching Snakepelt, guilt for not saving Jetfur.

Tigerstripe knew he had to still find Jetfur. And now, it seemed he had to do it alone. He glanced at Rain's dead body one last time and tapped her lightly with his tail.

"I love you, too," he whispered.

He left the fox's body and began heading down toward the river. He began to trudge along the shore, wondering if Jetfur had washed up on the shore like him.

"Jetfur!" he called every few minutes, praying he'd get some

response. Alas, none came.

Suddenly, a voice came from the trees behind him.

"PSSST!" it hissed.

Chapter 32

Tigerstripe turned his head, wondering where the mysterious whispering noise had come from. He spun around and saw two ears peeping out of some bushes.

"Over here!" the cat whispered.

"Jetfur?" Tigerstripe wondered, though he knew the voice did not belong to his friend. Still, the voice had a bit of familiarity to it.

"No. Is the fox dead?"

Tigerstripe cringed, trying to keep the image of Rain's dead body from his mind. He let out a low growl, suddenly not trusting this mysterious cat.

"Who is it?" he growled.

"Well, who are *you*?" the cat called from the bushes, curiosity ringing in her voice.

"No, you tell me first!" he hissed in response.

"You-you sound a little familiar," the she-cat murmured to herself. "I don't know why you'd be interested in me, but..."

The she-cat stepped forward, revealing herself as a brown tabby with one ripped ear. Tigerstripe let out a gasp.

"I'm Snakepelt."

"Snakepelt?!" he exclaimed, never so ecstatic to see the she-cat in his life. He ran to her, thrilled to see that she was okay and that he wasn't truly alone in this forest searching for Jetfur.

The she-cat shrunk back a bit, as if she were not thrilled to see

Tigerstripe or embrace him. Though, Tigerstripe supposed she wouldn't be. After all, he had unfairly left her in the woods.

"I-I don't know whre to begin. I'm so sorry, Snakepelt. You weren't the cat mentioned in the prophecy, and I stupidly sent you away. I hope you can forgive me. You don't understand the guilt I felt after that decision. Oh, but Jetfur...she-she fell down this cliff, and I can't find her! Rain's dead too. It's like everyone I know has betrayed me in some way."

Snakepelt just blinked at him, a blank expression painted on her face.

"I'm sorry, I'm not following. We just met, didn't we?"

Tigerstripe felt his heart break.

"Oh, no. You must've lost your memory somehow. It's me, Tigerstripe! Remember? You found me collapsed in the meadow and brought me to your clan. And then I left and you came after me. And despite my attempts to tell you to go away, you stayed. Don't you remember, Snakepelt?" Tears were beginning to gather in his eyes now. He'd already lost so many cats. He couldn't lose Snakepelt too.

Snakepelt stared at Tigerstripe and stared at him, as if she were trying to concentrate on recalling those memories. But her eyes instead seemed to dull.

"I don't know you," she said.

Before Tigerstripe could reply, a tiny voice broke into the conversation.

"EXCUSE ME, MISTER!"

Tigerstripe spun around and watched as a young she-kit ran up to him.

"WHO ARE YOU?" she asked, her voice screeching with each word.

"Nellie! You're not supposed to run off to weird cats. They might kill

you!" came another voice. Tigerstripe watched as another kit approached him. The young she-kit, Nellie, pouted a little when her brother pushed her aside.

"Hi, don't hurt me. But you can do something about my sister. She's annoying," the tom kit said.

"MOUSE! Don't say that!" Nellie squeaked, horrified.

Mouse shook his head and spun around. "It was a *joke*, Nellie."

"Well, it wasn't funny to me," Nellie replied, pouting.

Tigerstripe tilted his head, the names of Nellie and Mouse emerging from distant memories. He froze, suddenly recognizing where he had heard them before.

"Wait a second. Are you Krait's kits?" he asked.

"Krait? Is she still alive?" Mouse asked, looking around excitedly.

Nellie, who had been licking her paw, pricked her ears at the mention of her mother's name.

"Mother? Do you know her? Can we find her? Did she look all weird because of that fire she almost died in?" Questions spilled out of the young kit's mouth.

Snakepelt turned toward Tigerstripe in confusion.

"You know these kits' mother? They ran into me, and it was a good thing too. There are lots of horrible cats out there. I agreed to help them find their father. They told me their mother was dead, but it seems like she's not."

Tigerstripe turned toward the kits whose eyes were fixated on him. He didn't have the heart to tell them what a terrible she-cat their mother was or how he had nearly killed her himself.

"Um. I'm not sure if she's alive or not. There was a time we thought she was dead, but I just recently saw her. Some cat attacked her, but I know for certain your father should be alive."

Nellie blinked in an immature, confused manner.

"So, she's dead...but alive?"

Mouse stared at Tigerstripe, equally confused.

"Do you know whre she is...Dead or alive? But where?"

Snakepelt's ears twitched, listening in on the conversation.

"The last time I saw her was at the top of that cliff," Tigerstripe explained, pointing his tail to the rocky edge of the cliff. "Who knows where she is by now. Your father is in the forest somewhere, although I don't know his exact location."

Nellie's excitement died away.

"Oh..." she mewed.

Mouse padded closer to his sister and licked her cheek in a comforting manner.

"It's okay. We'll find her. At least we know she's alive," he muttered.

His sister nodded faintly. "I hope she's not hurt."

Tigerstripe shuffled his paws awkwardly, feeling guilty. Then, he glanced at the kits, another thought occurring.

"Say, have any of you seen a black she-cat around here?"

Snakepelt blinked, but said nothing.

Nellie stared a little, then spoke. "Oh, yes! Half-drowned she was! In fact, we thought she was dea—"

Mouse cut off her sentence with a quiet hiss then turned to Tigerstripe, finishing off the story.

"Yes, she was on the brink of death. But Snakepelt helped her. Right?" He glanced at the tabby, but her eyes were clouded with a gray haze.

She nodded warily but said nothing.

"That cat was kind of like you!" Nellie broke in. "She was so glad to see Snakepelt, but Snakepelt said she didn't know her. That cat—OH! Oh, yeah. Her name was Jetfur, and she was a little disappointed when Snakepelt said she didn't know or even heard of her name. An—"

Snakepelt covered up the kitten's mouth.

"We saw her try to climb back up the cliff. She was too weak, and we tried to stop her. But we couldn't. We brought her back here, and the next day, she was gone."

Have I been out an entire day? Tigerstripe wondered. He was thrilled to know Jetfur was alive, but also frustrated.

"Not again! Do you know which direction she went in?"

"We don't know anything," Snakepelt replied, though he could detect nervousness in her tone that was enough to make any cat suspicious. Nellie's ears pricked, and Mouse turned to his sister.

"Is something the matter?" Mouse asked. Nellie blinked and shook her head.

"Are you sure?" Tigerstripe asked, not believing Snakepelt.

"Don't lie, Snakepelt," came an unfamiliar voice. "You know all too much about her..."

A small shape crawled out from where she was hiding, apparently having heard the last bit of conversation. Nellie pricked her ears attentively, and her eyes lit up. She let out a shriek of excitement and ran to the figure.

Tigerstripe glanced up, staring directly into Krait's eyes.

"Mommy!" Nellie exclaimed. Mouse rushed to his mother's side and joined his sister.

"Never leave again! *Never*!" Mouse shouted.

Krait nuzzled both of her kits, and for a second, Tigerstripe almost felt sorry for her.

"My kits, I would have never left if it weren't for a purpose. I love you," she spoke softly, tears trailing down her whiskers.

Snakepelt kept her eyes fixed on Krait.

"W-Whatever do you mean by that? I-I don't know anything. Nothing at all."

Tigerstripe finally came to his senses and marched straight up to Krait, unsheathing his claws.

"YOU! YOU THREW JETFUR DOWN THE CLIFF!" he spat.

Krait stiffened. The two kits stopped nuzzling and stepped back, glacning at each other in confusion. They obviously had no idea that the black she-cat they had tried to aid was injured due to the actions of their mother.

"Tigerstripe, I can explain," she argued. Tigerstripe glanced at her shoulder where a few claw marks lay. He shuddered, remembering how he had given them to her not too long before.

"Explain what?" he growled. "I don't know what made you follow Swampstar and do it, but you're a betrayor! I trusted you! We looked for Jetfur together, and what did you do once you found her? You tried to *kill* her!"

The kits shrank down glancing fearfully at the two. Krait, meanwhile, cast her gaze at the ground.

"I had to, Tigerstripe..."

"Do you think I care? Whatever he threatened to do to you doesn't matter! You hurt the only thing I had left in his fox-dung world!"

"He was going to kill them, Tigerstripe! I couldn't let my kits die!" she screeched. "YOU LOVE HER, TIGERSTRIPE! MAYBE I LOVE MY KITS!" Her fur had become frazzled in anger.

Tigerstripe felt his heart breaking. Twice now he had been told he loved Jetfur, and he was believing it even more.

"So? If Swampstar threatened that he would kill Jetfur, I wouldn't have thrown your kits off a cliff! I would *fight* him! You're a coward!"

Krait's eyes flickered. She took a deep breath and then turned and walked away. Her kits followed, their excitement now gone. They seemed to have no idea what was going on.

"Fine! Leave! I hope that decision haunts you the rest of your life!" Tigerstripe hissed, watching as Krait slowly faded from his view.

Chapter 33

Tigerstripe stood, watching as Krait walked off. He snarled in disgust, wondering why he had not just killed the she-cat when he had the chance. It was what any other MoonClan warrior would have done.

But I'm not a MoonClan warrior anymore, he reminded himself. He sighed, knowing that he wouldn't have been able to kill Krait anyway. They'd been too close and too good of friends.

Thinking of friends, Tigerstripe turned back to Snakepelt, heartache returning to him as he thought of her lost memory.

"Are you sure you haven't seen Jetfur?" he asked, praying that she was merely playing a practical joke on him and remembered everything.

Snakepelt's eyes were blank.

"I don't know this 'Jetfur' you speak of," she replied.

Tigerstripe glanced back, still noticing Krait in the distance. "KRAIT KNOWS!" he shouted at her. "DON'T YOU, KRAIT? BECAUSE YOU THREW HER OVER THE CLIFF!"

Krait did not turn around and finally faded from view. Snakepelt stood awkwardly and glanced from side to side.

"Um, yes. Of course," she murmured.

Tigerstripe sighed, knowing it was time to take initiative and look for Jetfur once again. He just hoped that Snakepelt would help him, whether she remembered him or not.

"I have an idea," Tigerstripe told his tabby friend. "Maybe she made it up the cliff. How about we climb to the top and glance around the territory? She might be injured in the forest somewhere," he

explained.

Without further ado, he padded to the side of the cliff and began sinking his claws into the moist dirt on the rocky hillside. Snakepelt glanced behind her as if someone were watching her and then slowly followed Tigerstripe's lead.

The climb was difficult, and Tigerstripe and Snakepelt moved very slowly. Snakepelt spoke no words but simply followed the tom, watching his every move and trying to repeat it.

Tigerstripe gripped his claws into each opening and hauled himself up. He could feel his energy draining, and often, he had to pause and rest, but the thought of seeing Jetfur on the other side kept him going.

Occasionally, he'd glance back at Snakepelt, who seemed to be keeping up somewhat fine. She struggled a bit more than him, but so far, she hadn't complained.

Nearly to the top, Tigerstripe used all his hind leg strength to push himself forward. He began to become excited to see the top ahead, and he let out a shriek of excitement.

"Come on, Snakepelt!" he called, glancing down at the she-cat.

"Tigerstripe, I'm not sure if this is safe," she said, digging her claws deeply into the rocky surface. Tiny pebbles crumbled away from the terrain as she moved.

"We have to try," he urged. He pushed himself forward, nearly losing his footing at one point. Finally, he reached his claws onto the surface of the cliff and hauled himself up, glancing down at the cliff he had leapt over below.

"Come on, Snakepelt!" he called down to her.

He glanced around, glad to be back on top of the cliff again. He breathed heavily, still tired from the climb. If only Snakepelt would hurry up, they could find Jetfur quickly.

Snakepelt breathed heavily and tried to scramble to the top. As she

reached her paw forward, she lost her grip and fell. Tigerstripe watched in awe as she tumbled back down to the earth without emitting so much as a scream.

Tigerstripe gasped, knowing the she-cat could not be in good health after the fall.

"I'LL GET HELP!" he shouted to her from the top of the cliff, hoping she could hear him. He burst into the forest, Jetfur gone from his mind. The first thing he had to do was find help for Snakepelt.

He knew there was a clan nearby due to the battle he had witnessed. Perhaps they could help Snakepelt.

He rushed through the woods and then paused, screaming, "HELLO?!"

He glanced around, unsure which direction to go, when he heard a rustle of bushes. He spun around and watched as a ginger tom emerged, a menacing look on his face. Tigerstripe, however, was merely relieved just to see a cat.

"Oh, hello! Thank you! My friend just--"

"What are you doing crossing our territory?!" he growled.

Before Tigerstripe could reply, the tom spoke again.

"Nevermind that. You need to come back with us to camp!" the tom snarled.

"But my friend," Tigerstripe urged as the tom nudged against him and began pushing him in the opposite direction of Snakepelt.

"No! Wait! You don't understand! My friend, she--"

"Silence from you!" the tom hissed.

Tigerstripe sighed and headed with him to camp. After a few minutes of walking, they came into a clearing filled with cats and dens. Tigerstripe shuddered, remembering of his clan experience. The scent of the clan was somewhat familiar, though he couldn't

exactly put a name to it.

As they entered the camp, all eyes were turned toward Tigerstripe and the ginger tom. Before any cat could react, a black and white tom, whom Tigerstripe presumed was leader, padded over.

"I found this tom in our territory," the ginger tom explained.

The black and white tom exchanged glances with the ginger tom and Tigerstripe, then nodded. "Thank you, Foxflame. I'll handle it from here."

The ginger tom dipped his head and exited, leaving Tigerstripe alone with the black and white tom.

"What are you doing here?" the tom asked calmly.

"My friend fell off a cliff!" Tigerstripe exclaimed. "Her name is Snakepelt. I need some--"

He froze, noticing a black cat sitting in the camp and chatting with some other clan members. The cat was not facing his way, but from the back, he could almost swear it was...

"JETFUR?!" he gasped.

Chapter 34

The black cat spun around, and Tigerstripe's heart immediately sank. Though she had appeared to look quite similar to Jetfur, it was not the same cat. He was even farther from finding his friend and helping Snakepelt.

"Oh, um. You're not Jetfur, are you?" he murmured quietly, feeling embarrassed.

"Oh, I see you've met our other clan visitor," a white tom said to Tigerstripe. "She's looking for a cat named Snakepelt."

Tigerstripe's ears pricked.

"Oh, that's why I came here, you see. Snakepelt fell down a cliff, and I'm trying to get help!"

The she-cat's eyes widened, and she let out a loud gasp.

"Oh, no! It has already happened!" she shouted. She pushed past Tigerstripe, ignoring him. She started fleeing toward the entrance of the camp and back into the woods.

"Wait! Come back!" Tigerstripe called, positioning his body to race after her. He had made it but one stride when Foxflame cut off his path.

"Oh, no you don't," he warned.

Though the tom was as large as him, he was not nearly as muscular as Tigerstripe, allowing Tigerstripe to push easily past him and rush after the black she-cat. He noticed her in the distance and raced after her.

"Where are you going?!" he yowled, hopelessly following her.

The she-cat ignored him and continued to run. Tigerstripe

recognized the pathway she was following and realized she was heading back toward the cliffs...toward Snakepelt

Maybe she's going to help, he wondered.

His prediction was correct, for the she-cat paused at a slope and began descending down. Tigerstripe followed behind her, careful not to slip as tiny pebbles rolled from beneath his paws.

They reached the bottom, and the she-cat took off again. Tigerstripe ran behind her, watching as the slope became higher and steeper until it resembled the cliff that both Jetfur and Snakepelt had tumbled over.

In the distance, Tigerstripe noticed a limp body lying on the floor. His heart seized, and he realized it was Snakepelt.

Is she dead? he wondered.

The she-cat came to a pause beside Snakepelt and glanced at her with concern. Tigerstripe approached the she-cat slowly and glanced at Snakepelt. He sighed with relief to see her chest was still rising and falling.

"Snakepelt?" he spoke softly, touching her with his paw.

The she-cat's eyes opened, and she squinted against the bright sun.

"Wha-wha? Huh?" she mumbled.

"The illness is still afflicted," the black she-cat whispered.

"What are you talking about?" Tigerstripe asked.

"There's this terrible illness...I would even go as far to say a curse. It causes memories to be forgotten, suddenly remembered again, and then vanished. Realistic day-dreams occur also. Snakepelt would not have fallen on her own. She must've been trapped within her mind. Did she let out a scream as she fell?"

Tigerstripe shook his head.

"Then I am correct."

"How do you reverse the curse?" he asked, glancing worriedly at Snakepelt.

"I-I don't know, exactly," the she-cat confessed. "However, I did hear of a strange prophecy that may help."

"What is it?" Tigerstripe asked. "And would you mind introducing yourself?"

The she-cat ignored his second question.

"I don't remember the prophecy word for word but...*One who has the illness of memory loss and day dreams that set lies...her only hope is the cat with red eyes."*

That seemed word-for-word, Tigerstripe thought. His mind immediately flashed to Korosu. Her eyes had been such an unusual red.

"Perhaps I can be of some assistance?" came a familiar mew.

Tigerstripe spun around, noticing a cat in the distance. He immediately recognized her slim figure and watched as she licked a paw. Her eyes opened, and she glanced at Tigerstripe. They were blood red.

"Korosu," Tigerstripe growled.

Korosu approached them and grinned maliciously.

"Oh, don't look so upset," she spoke, pouting. "I said I could help."

"You led Snakepelt to her death," he growled.

"I told you where she was. That was all you wanted from me," she protested.

"Can you help Snakepelt?" the black she-cat asked.

"I can," Korosu purred.

"Can you really? Or are you planning to hurt my other friend too?" Tigerstripe growled.

Korosu ignored him.

"Well, let me tell you. Do you know of a cat named...Krait?"

"Oh, I *know* Krait!" he spat. "That betraying, terrible piece of fox-dung! She threw Jetfur over that cliff!" he growled. "I've been trying to find her since."

Korosu's eyes glowed with satisfaction. "Yes, yes. Shame on her. However, to assist your friend, I need you to take me to her. We have some...unfinished business, you see."

"Um, I don't know where she exactly went," Tigerstripe explained. "I can take you to the last place I saw her."

"That will do," Korosu agreed.

"But how will this help?" Tigerstripe asked.

"You'll see," she purred.

"I'll stay here with Snakepelt," the black she-cat decided. "I'll try to help her with the pain some."

"If the curse is lifted, her pain should fade," Korosu promised.

Tigerstripe glanced at the she-cat warily.

"Fine. Let's find Krait and get this over with," he murmured. He padded away with Korosu by his side, wondering if he had just made the worst decision of his life.

Chapter 35

Tigerstripe glanced back nervously as the unknown cat and Snakepelt faded from his view. Korosu padded along beside him quietly. The silence made the tom shiver as he did not know whether this was a death trap or not.

"Quit looking back," Korosu snapped as Tigerstripe turned his head for the fifth or sixth time. He couldn't help but be filled with regret and uncertainty. Korosu had not been kind in the past. Why was he trusting her now?

"Sorry," he murmured, continuing on.

He was glad the walk would not be long as the last place he'd seen Krait was on the shore of the river near the outskirts of the forest. He got a shudder thinking of Rain's dead body lying beside the river, and he prayed it was gone by now.

"Cold?" Korosu asked, noticing his shudder.

"Nevermind that," Tigerstripe growled. "Follow me."

"I do hope you remember where you last saw the she-cat. Or else I do believe certain death may come to Snakepelt," she spoke.

Tigerstripe spun around, growling at the she-cat. "Are you here to help me or not?"

"That depends. Do you trust me?"

"No, but you're the only hope I have," he grunted.

He led her down the shore of the winding river, recognizing the familiar landscape. With each step he became more familiarized with the area, and soon, he began to pick up stale scents.

"It shouldn't be that much farther now," he told Korosu.

"Oh, good," the slim feline purred.

He turned a corner and recognized the setting as where he'd last seen Krait. Korosu lingered behind him though Tigerstripe didn't let this stop him. He advanced a few steps then shuddered at the light tufts of orange fur coating some of the rocks of the shore.

Rain, he thought. Her body appeared to be gone, either floating down the river or dragged off by some animal, but the dried blood stains and bits of orange fur would be implanted in his mind forever.

"Everything okay there, Tigey?" Korosu asked.

Tigerstripe shook the thoughts away and nodded.

"She disappeared into these woods," he explained, pointing to the woods that were only a few foxlengths from them.

Korosu lifted her air to the nose and froze. Tigerstripe watched as each strand of fur seemed to stand on end on the white she-cat.

"Should we head in there?" Tigerstripe asked.

Korosu nodded slowly.

Tigerstripe quietly approached the woods, Korosu awkwardly lingering behind again. He turned around once or twice, though the she-cat always appeared to be behind him. He felt his fur begin to stand on end and wondered if this was just a secret plan of Korosu's to kill him when he least expected it.

He entered into the woods, the sound of the river slowly fading behind him. The trees soon began to enclose him and Korosu, and new scents began to enter through his nose. One was fresh and familiar, and Tigerstripe suddenly realized that Krait was nearby.

He turned around to alert Korosu, but the she-cat had disappeared. He glanced around, wondering where she could've gone.

"Korosu?" he called.

There was no answer.

Tigerstripe began to get nervous now, imagining the she-cat leaping out of a tree and striking him with her sharp claws.

"Tigerstripe?" came a quiet mew.

Tigerstripe spun around and watched Krait emerge from the bushes.

"YOU!" he spat.

"Come to kill me now?" Krait asked. "I'm surprised you didn't come after me earlier."

Tigerstripe growled and resisted all urge to shove his claws into the she-cat's throat right there. Instead, he slowly sheathed his claws and took a deep breath.

"I'm not here to fight. I'm here to talk to you," he explained.

"Talk to me? About what?"

"Like you don't know," he growled.

"I don't," she replied.

"I already know you hate me. I could tell when you threw Jetfur over that cliff. But now you've also placed a curse on Snakepelt?!"

Krait stared at him blankly. "Snakepelt?" she asked. "I've never heard of such a cat."

"But you do!" he growled. "I know you do! You placed a curse on her that erased her memory, and now, she's about to die!"

"I know of no such thing!" the she-cat spat.

Tigerstripe couldn't take it and launched at her. Krait was caught by surprise and gasped as Tigerstripe pinned her down. He unsheathed his claws and dug them into her shoulders.

"Tell me the truth!" he demanded, rage soaring through him.

Krait was quiet for a few moment.

"Fine. Let me go, and I'll tell you the truth," she growled.

Tigerstripe held her down a few moments longer before he rose from her and let her sit up. Fresh blood poured from her shoulders, though she appeared not to mind. It was at that moment when Tigerstripe wondered if her kits were nearby.

Why should I be thinking of her kits? She's a monster, he thought.

"I have often associated myself with the Dark Forest," Krait began.

"You're not even a warrior," Tigerstripe interrupted.

Krait growled slightly. "Do you not recall the forest you found me in? It was filled with dark power. I came under its influence after I lost my mate and kits. It seemed like that dark power would be the only way to help me find them."

"But you seemed so normal. How does this even have to do with the curse?"

"I am normal," Krait argued. "Or...was. It's confusing now. Everything has become blurred. It never seemed to affect me too much until after..." She paused, then glanced at Tigerstripe. "I did not mean to deliberately put a curse on any cat. The Dark Forest's powers are strong, and sometimes just becoming acquainted with a cat and experiencing emotions can lead me to do something terrible."

"But nothing ever happened to me," Tigerstipe argued.

"I didn't feel as much power when I first met you," Krait explained. "Whatever happened to your friend, I'm sorry, but it was not intentionally done."

"Well, how do I reverse the curse? How do I stop it?!" Tigerstripe demanded.

Krait paused for a moment and glanced away.

"There is no way to cure it," she told him.

Tigerstripe paused and glanced at her in shock. If there was no cure, he'd never see Snakepelt alive again...

Chapter 36

"What do you mean?" Tigerstripe asked, frozen in shock. "There has to be some way to cure it. My friend is with a stranger dying, and you're telling me there's no cure!"

Krait shrunk down, frightened by Tigerstripe's harsh words.

"There is no cure," she repeated more quietly.

Tigerstripe let out a growl and unsheathed his claws. His hatred for Krait had grown even more so in the past few days. She had not only deliberately thrown Jetfur off a cliff, but now she would be the cause of Snakepelt's death. Why did she enjoy taking everything he loved? Why had he once been fond of her?

Why didn't I listen to StarClan's warning? he thought to himself, knowing that Krait was the cursed cat he'd been warned about.

"That's a lie!" came a vicious snarl.

Tigerstripe spun around to find Korosu had leapt down from a nearby tree. The slim feline glided past Tigerstripe and approached Krait, her red eyes gleaming with fierceness.

"Wh-what do you mean?" Krait stammered, clearly intimidated by Korosu.

Tigerstripe glanced at the two and for once was glad Korosu was with him.

"You deliberately placed the curse on that she-cat," Korosu growled.

"I did no such thing!" Krait retorted, fur beginning to stand up on her back.

"Oh, really?" Korosu asked. She approached Krait and circled around her. Tigerstripe stood back, watching Krait's eyes widen.

"I am familiar with the Dark Forest, too," Korosu purred. "I am aware of its powers and what you've become vulnerable too. You were weak, confused. Perhaps you might not have meant it...or perhaps you did...but I can see when the Dark Forest is working through a cat."

Tigerstripe just sat in awe, utterly confused.

"It's true!" Krait suddenly exclaimed. "But I didn't know what I was doing! She was the first cat I'd come across since..."

"Why don't you tell Tigerstripe what it is you've done?" Korosu growled.

"What's going on?" Tigerstripe asked.

Krait spun around and glanced down at her paws.

"I let the Dark Forest possess me," she admitted.

"What?!" Tigerstripe exclaimed. In the time he'd been with her, he hadn't suspected any such thing. "You're not even a clan cat."

"No, but evil exists everywhere."

"Tell him why you did it," Korosu continued.

"I-I was desperate. I'd lost my mate and kits, and those woods that I wandered into...the woods I found you in, Tigerstripe...were full of dark power. I invoked a Dark Forest spirit and allowed its power to enter me. It wasn't so bad at first. I continued on normally many days until when I noticed Snakepelt in the same woods. I-I'm not sure what happened, but I recall getting furious with her because she killed the squirrel I was going to eat and then...well, she seemed funny afterwards. She didn't seem insane yet, but something didn't seem right when she walked away."

"And you did this before I even met you?!" Tigerstripe exclaimed, furious.

"Yes...but I hadn't known I'd done wrong. I just wanted to find my kits, that's all."

"But this was not the only time you drew on their power, was it?" Korosu asked, clearly wanting her to spill more.

Krait finally glanced up now and stared at Tigerstripe.

"No. When that hunter shot me...I...I did die. But the Dark Forest was able to bring me back," she explained. "And now I feel their presence more than ever."

Tigerstripe nodded, knowing that would explain Krait's odd appearances since her "death."

"Now...the cure," Korosu purred.

"There is no cure," Krait repeated. "And I wish you'd leave me alone too. I came under your influence, and now I can't leave it."

"I helped her become more in control with her Dark Forest powers," Korosu explained to Tigerstripe.

"And now you treat me like a slave," Krait spat.

"But you have your kits now," Korosu pointed out. "Though I don't believe my work is finished with you yet."

Krait unsheathed her claws, clearly furious with Korosu by this point. "No. I am sick of you and your Dark Forest spirits taking over my life. I want to be free!"

Korosu took a stance and unsheathed her claws.

"Are you asking for a fight then, kitty?"

"Um...guys...the cure," Tigerstripe whimpered, not sure what was

going down between them.

Krait let out a yowl and launched herself at the white she-cat. Korosu quickly slid aside and sliced at Krait's leg. The Siamese let out a yowl as fresh blood dripped from her new wound. Tigerstripe was unsure what to do besides sit and watch. He watched as Korosu moved quickly. Krait dodged very few attacks, and Tigerstripe felt that with each lunge Korosu made at her, a new wound appeared.

"ENOUGH!" Krait suddenly yowled. Suddenly, a transparent cobra seemed to waver above her. Tigerstripe shivered, recognizing it as the one that had appeared so often in his dreams.

"The Dark Forest spirit," Korosu whispered.

Suddenly, Tigerstripe noticed a faint red glow emanating from Korosu's pelt. He was not sure what was at work here, but he suspected dark power.

Korosu let out a battle yowl and launched at the she-cat. She knocked Krait to the ground and threw her. The spirits wavering above the she-cats seemed to be fighting too until Korosu gave one last deep clawmark into Krait's side.

The she-cat yowled while the cobra above her let out a shrill. It slowly faded from view, and Korosu's red glow faded as well. Krait lay on the ground, breathing heavily.

"The curse should be broken now," Korosu explained to Tigerstripe.

"What? How?" Tigerstripe asked.

Krait slowly stood up, blood dripping down her.

"What? Where am I? What's going on?" she wondered. She appeared to be utterly confused and exhausted.

"Tigerstripe, is that you?" she asked.

Tigerstripe glanced at Korosu in confusion.

"The Dark Forest has left her body. The curse should be lifted," she further explained.
While Tigerstripe was glad to know that Krait was no longer subject to Dark Forest power, he could not forgive her for all the wrongdoings she'd done. He turned to Korosu and eyed her with suspicion.

"And you're just letting me away?" he asked. "Aren't you going to ask for some repayment? Are you going to slit my throat now?"

Korosu let out a maniacal life. "Don't get your tail in a twist, Tigey. I won't be killing you today. You've done a great service to me by bringing me to Krait. As for repayment, I simply ask that you allow me to take this she-cat with me."

Tigerstripe frowned. He knew whatever Korosu had planned for the she-cat would not be good. In addition, she had kits too. But he didn't want to mess with Korosu, and Krait had already negatively altered his life so much. He didn't want to care for her as well as Snakepelt.
Tigerstripe sighed, guilt filling his body.

"All right. You can have her. Do what you want with her. I won't stop you," he said.

"Tigerstripe...don't let me go with her. I don't trust her," Krait mewed quietly.

"Tigerstripe has made a very good choice, Krait," Korosu purred.

"I'm sorry," was all Tigerstripe could tell Krait. He ignored the pain glimmering in her eyes.

Jetfur and Snakepelt are more important, he told himself again and again.

"Thank you for your service, Tigey," Korosu told him as she began to lead Krait away. "You should return to your Snakepelt now. Her memory should be recovered."

Suddenly remembering the curse was broken, Tigerstripe nodded and took off in a quick flash to where he'd last left Snakepelt. He wanted to get as far away as Krait and Korosu as possible before any more guilt could set into his system.

Chapter 37

Tigerstripe padded away from Korosu and Krait, doing his best not to turn around and steal a glance. He couldn't help but feel guilty for letting Krait go so easily. He was still furious with her, no doubt, for all that she'd done to him, but he knew Korosu would most likely do much worse to her.

Tigerstripe shook these thoughts away, instead focused on Snakepelt. He hoped that Korosu hadn't been lying and that the curse really had been broken. If so, he couldn't wait to see Snakepelt again. His tail twitched with excitement at the thought of it.

But will she be furious with me? he wondered. He doubted she'd be as excited as him to meet again. After all, he had sent her away in tears moons before.

Tigerstripe padded out of the woods and began walking down the shore again. He kept his eyes peeled for Jetfur and held his nose high in case her scent drifted his way, but he was unsuccessful in finding anything that brought him near her.

Perhaps Snakepelt will recall where she went, he thought. It was a long shot, but maybe she would have more information to offer him.

Gentle waves washed along the river's shore as Tigerstripe trod down it. He kept his gaze on the cliffs up ahead, hoping to be away from this land soon. As soon as he'd spoken to Snakepelt, he supposed he would set off to find Jetfur again.

Maybe Snakepelt will join me, he thought excitedly. After all, he'd never been alone in his search. And with Rain gone...he was in need of companionship again.

Tigerstripe rounded a corner now and knew that Snakepelt and the cat that looked similar to Jetfur would be just up ahead. In fact, he could see their figures vaguely in the distance. Anxious, the striped

tom picked up his pace and bounded toward them.

As he came closer, he noticed Snakepelt still appeared to be lying down with her eyes shut, and his heart seized for a moment. Perhaps the curse had not been broken. The black she-cat, however, caught his eye, and her calmness relieved him.

"You did it," she whispered.

"Was it broken?" Tigerstripe asked. He glanced at Snakepelt, watching as her chest rose and fell. While scratches still covered her body, she did not appear to be in as much pain as before.

"She became calm suddenly," the she-cat explained, "and I could feel the Dark Spirit leave her. She passed out shortly after."

"When will she awake?" Tigerstripe asked nervously, fearing she wouldn't.

At that moment, the she-cat began to stir slightly and move her body.

"Now, I believe. If the curse truly is broken, she should be healed, and her memory should be cured," the she-cat explained.

Tigerstripe watched as Snakepelt began to move each of her paws and stretch them. Suddenly, her eyes burst open, immediately falling on Tigerstripe.

"Snakepelt...are you okay?" Tigerstripe asked quietly.

The she-cat seemed confused and disoriented for a moment. She slowly rose to a sit and glanced around, befuddled. She let out a few moans of pain as she rose, though she didn't appear to be gravely injured. Tigerstripe was afraid that perhaps the curse had not been broken when she spoke.

"You," she sneered at Tigerstripe. She rose to all fours now and approached Tigerstripe. The tom backed up, suddenly frightened of his friend.

"Woah, wait...let me explain," he began.

"You sent me away when you knew it wasn't the right thing to do! And now you come crawling back here..."

"It was a mistake!" Tigerstripe exclaimed.

"Ha!" Snakepelt growled. The black she-cat had moved herself to the side, awkwardly observing the two.

"Well, I found Jetfur, and then I lost her again. My story sounds a bit like yours, doesn't it? So what's your excuse? Why are you back here?" she growled. She came closer to Tigerstripe and pressed her body against his. He pushed her back and kept her from striking him with a claw.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," he repeated, tears gathering in his eyes. "I-I didn't think what I was doing was right. I thought I was listening to StarClan. You weren't the cat they warned me about. I've already learned my lesson."

Snakepelt paused, taken aback by Tigerstripe's response.

"Who was the cat?" she asked quietly.

"Krait," Tigerstripe responded. "You must've met her in the woods. She-she cursed you. And she threw Jetfur over a cliff."

"Is that why I'm here?" Snakepelt asked.

"Yes," the black cat interrupted. "You were cursed by Krait, and your memory was lost for some time. I am surprised how quickly old feelings were able to reemerge. I had expected you to be more confused."

"When I try to recall the past several sunrises, my mind is fuzzy. Losing Jetfur was a blur too. My body aches though," she said.

"You fell down a cliff," Tigerstripe explained.

"And I survived?"

Tigerstripe nodded.

"Jetfur...she's dead, isn't she?" Snakepelt asked.

"I don't think so," Tigerstripe replied. "I leapt off the cliff after her and found you some short time afterwards. You were confused then, but you had become acquainted with Krait's kits. They claimed to have seen Jetfur washed up on the shore but she had disappeared when they returned to the spot."

"Thank StarClan," Snakepelt breathed.

"I'm sorry, Snakepelt," Tigerstripe repeated. "I failed you, and I didn't mean to. You did so much for me...and Rain, and I neglected you like that. I should've followed my instincts. I shouldn't have left you."

Snakepelt frowned then lightly touched her tail to his shoulder.

"I understand why you did it, and while I was furious...I don't blame you. Not now. I'm assuming you were the one who helped free me from the curse."

Tigerstripe nodded.

"Then the debt is repaid," Snakepelt spoke. "Where is your fox friend by the way? I'd like to see her again too."

"She...didn't make it," Tigerstripe replied solemnly.

"Oh...I'm sorry," Snakepelt replied.

Tigerstripe nodded quietly, holding back tears. The fox's death still hung on his shoulders. He didn't want to think of Rain right now.

Noticing how upset he was, Snakepelt sat down beside him and wrapped a tail around him. Normally, Tigerstripe would be opposed to such an act, but this was a friendly and comforting gesture, and it made Tigerstripe feel slightly better. He did not make eye contact with the she-cat, but he was glad to have her by his side again. He let out a sigh and slowly regained his confidence.

"I hate to interrupt," came the voice of the black she-cat behind him. "But we must decide what to do now."

Chapter 38

Tigerstripe turned around, disheartened to have the moment broken. But he knew that the black she-cat was right. They had to decide what to do now.

"Yes...yes, you're right," Snakepelt murmured, turning around as well. She, too, seemed disappointed.

"Snakepelt," Tigerstripe began. "I really am sorry for treating you so poorly, and I'd love to have you travel with me again to find Jetfur. You're not obliged to come, but...if you'd like, I wouldn't mind your company."

The tabby smiled weakly.

"That's kind of you, Tigerstripe, but...I think it's best I return home," she replied.

Tigerstripe nodded, his heart sinking. He hadn't planned on returning to his journey alone, and he certainly wasn't looking forward to it.

"Snakepelt is right," the black she-cat added. "Her mind has been tampered with, and she needs to rest. I think going back to the clan will be the best option for her."

"But what about the cats back there?" Tigerstripe argued. "And how they treated you! You really want to go back to that?"

"I understand what you're saying, but it's time I stood up to them," Snakepelt admitted. "It was fun traveling with you while it lasted, Tigerstripe, but I think this is the best option."

"She'll be well taken care of back home. I'll be sure of that," the black she-cat told him.

Tigerstripe glanced around, still unsure of their decision.

"I've never traveled alone before," he admitted. He had been so set on traveling alone when MoonClan had ended, but after all he'd been through, he didn't want to be on his own.

"And what about Jetfur?" he added. "I still need to find her."

Snakepelt sighed. "You will. I know you will. She must be still alive."

The black she-cat nodded beside Snakepelt.

"You sure I'll be able to make it on my own?" Tigerstripe asked Snakepelt.

"I know you will," she promised. "Even if you are a fox-brain half the time."

Tigerstripe laughed then rested his tail on her shoulder.

"Hey, I'll miss you, Snakepelt," he said quietly.

"I'll miss you, too," she responded. There was a pause as she glanced down at her paws then glanced back up. "Can I tell you something?"

"Sure," Tigerstripe responded.

"I've had a big crush on you since I met you," she blurted.

"O-Oh," Tigerstripe stammered, taken aback. He guessed he'd always known, but it had come to a shock. Suddenly he was confronted with his feelings about her. He'd liked her, he'd known that, but perhaps not in that way...When he compared her to Jetfur...well, Jetfur always stood out.

"Don't feel so bad. I know you love Jetfur," Snakepelt explained. "It took me a while to realize at first that it wouldn't work out, but I'm glad you were kind to me."

There it was again. First Rain had mentioned it, and now Snakepelt. Was it really that obvious?

I love Jetfur, Tigerstripe finally admitted to himself. He let out a sigh

of relief, glad to have finally decided on his feelings. He knew he wouldn't have gone on this perilous mission if he hadn't loved Jetfur. And the fact that he was still continuing when hope was slowly fading confirmed it.

"Listen, Snakepelt, you're very nice, and-and I liked you, too. Not in that way, but you still are a very close friend of mine. But I don't want you to think that I don't like you because of your...condition," he explained. "You're right. Jetfur means a lot to me."

Snakepelt grinned. "I'm glad you love Jetfur. When you find her, she'll be lucky to have you."

"You mean she likes me, too?"

"Well, she did talk an awful lot about you," Snakepelt purred. "And what you said about me...I know it's true. You never treated me differently. Thank you for that."

"When you go back to the clan, I hope you find a cat who loves for who you are and treats you with respect. Your not being able to have kits shouldn't define you. You'd be lucky to be anyone's mate," he assured her.

Snakepelt grinned. "Thanks, Tigerstripe. I'm beginning to learn that, too."

"Good luck to you," he said.

"And to you," Snakepelt replied. She moved forward and nuzzled his cheek slightly before turning away.

"Are we ready to go?" the black she-cat asked Snakepelt.

"Looks like it," Snakepelt replied.

"Wait just a second. You've never introduced yourself," Tigerstripe told the black she-cat.

The she-cat turned to Tigerstripe and grinned.

"I suppose I haven't," she admitted. "I'm Jetfur's sister. Pleased to

meet you."

Tigerstripe's eyes widened. Of course! That's why they had looked so familiar! He tilted his head in confusion though, remembering that Swampstar had claimed to had killed her. She looked very alive to him.

"I don't answer questions about the past," Jetfur's sister told him before he dared to ask any more questions.

"I only have one question, and it's not about you, I swear," he said.

"And what is that?"

"First, is Jetfur alive?" he asked.

"This sounds like it's going to turn into more than one question," she smirked.

Tigerstripe rolled his eyes.

"I believe so. I never saw her bound away from the river, but I can sense her," she explained.

Tigerstripe sighed in relief, his heart suddenly beginning to race. Jetfur was alive!

"Do you have any idea where I could find her?" he asked.

The she-cat paused and tilted her head for a moment.

"Well, if I were someone looking for a lost cat, I'd go to the place it all began. Where I lost her the first time..."

"The meadow!" Tigerstripe gasped. "Do I go there?"

"Good-bye, Tigerstripe," the black she-cat said as she slowly began to turn around. Snakepelt waved good-bye with her tail and accompanied her, leaving Tigerstripe alone on the river's edge.

Go back to where it all began, he thought again.

"I've got to go to the meadow where I lost her," he whispered to

himself. And with that, he bounded off in the opposite direction, determined to return to where he had lost the she-cat the first time.

Chapter 39

It had been several sunrises since Tigerstripe had embarked on his journey to find Jetfur. Eventually Snakepelt and Jetfur's sister had faded from his sight, and for once, he was on his own.

Tigerstripe had always imagined being a rogue, though he found it hard to believe that he had once craved solitude. He wandered alone many days in the forest, bored and lonely. He longed to hear Snakepelt tease him, longed to hear Rain's jumbled speech, even longed to hear Krait joking with him.

Soon, I'll find Jetfur, he promised himself.

So for days he attempted to return to the meadow where they had once been separated. It had taken a little bit, but soon, Tigerstripe realized he was on course. He picked up familiar scents here and there that smelled faintly of the tall, golden grass and the woods around it.

Tigerstripe opened his eyes one morning to find dew dripping down on his nose. He sneezed, blasting it away from him, and then stood up.

Today marked a moon since he had left Snakepelt and had gone off on his own. He hoped that he was getting closer to the meadow as he wasn't sure how much longer he could bear the loneliness.

His stomach rumbled, and he decided to look for some breakfast. Prey had been scarce the night before, and he'd gone to bed hungry.

He slowly padded through the woods, keeping his ears pricked and nose held up to detect any sign of prey. He first found a stream before he found any wildlife. He drank from there and then continued on his way, his stomach still grumbling.

Finally, he spotted two birds perched on a low branch. Licking his

lips, he went around the back of the tree and quietly sank his claws into the bark. He eased himself up slowly until the birds could be seen.

As soon as he was about to pounce, one turned and let out an alarming chirp. Tigerstripe leapt and managed to catch one, though the other flew away.

Satisfied (though he wouldn't have minded two), Tigerstripe eased back down the tree and ate his breakfast. He sighed, missing breakfasts with Rain or Snakepelt. Here he had no one to talk to, so he ate quickly and soon continued on his way.

The woods were windy and endless, and Tigerstripe wondered at times if he was just going farther from the meadow.

Besides worrying about getting lost, he wondered if Jetfur had even survived, or if she'd even want to see him. He had failed to save her, and though Snakepelt and Krait's kits had noticed her, perhaps she limped over to a nearby tree and died. These were depressing thoughts, but it was all that Tigerstripe could think about in moments of worry.

He sniffed the air and headed in the direction that seemed the most familiar. Along the way, he listened to the chirp of birds and buzzing of bugs. It was green-leaf, and the hot sun gleaming on Tigerstripe's dark pelt caused him to sit and rest under the shade a few times during the day.

While Tigerstripe was glad that green-leaf brought more prey, he didn't like the hot weather for which his furry pelt did not stand well. He supposed Jetfur would think the same, her coat being so black and all.

The day continued on as it normally did. Tigerstripe attempted to find the right way while debating questions in his head. He supposed that when he had traveled with others, he was able to keep his mind off such matters.

By the end of the day, when the sun was beginning to set, Tigerstripe was filled with so much doubt that he wondered if he'd

ever see Jetfur again.

Perhaps in StarClan, he thought unhappily.

Indigo was beginning to fill the sky, but Tigerstripe didn't want to stop now. He knew that each step would bring him closer to Jetfur, and he didn't want to abandon his path now.

But soon the heat began to fade and the stars shone, and Tigerstripe knew he had to rest. He'd been traveling all day, and he was awfully tired.

He glanced around in the woods for quite a while and then was able to locate some large plants whose leaves created a perfect overhang. Tigerstripe nestled beneath them and shut his eyes, though it took a while for sleep to come.

All Tigerstripe could think of was how much longer he'd be in these woods and whether he should just give up the search altogether.

"Please, give me a sign, StarClan," he muttered.

Then, exhaustion took him, and he fell asleep.

Tigerstripe opened his eyes and let out a gasp. He found himself in a glittering forest with flowing streams and plentiful prey. He calmed down and realized he was in StarClan. He let out a deep breath and glanced around, hoping he wouldn't see Jetfur here...or that cobra, for that matter.

"Tigerstripe," came a familiar mew.

Tigerstripe turned around to see Daisyflower, the StarClan she-cat who had spoken with him several times before.

"Oh, phew. I hoped you weren't Jetfur," he muttered.

The calico chuckled.

"Don't you worry. She's not here," she promised.

Tigerstripe's eyes widened. "She's not? You mean...she's still alive?"

The she-cat nodded. "And she misses you too, Tigerstripe."

"But I'm never going to find her," he muttered. "I pretend like I know where I'm going, but in all honesty, I'm very lost."

Daisyflower laughed again.

"You're not lost. Your instincts have led you in the right direction. You're closer than you think."

"Really? How much longer?" he asked excitedly.

"A few days, perhaps."

"But where do I go? How do I get back to the meadow?" he asked.

The scenery around him shifted, and he found himself back in the old forest he had fallen asleep in. He shuddered as he noticed his sleeping self.

"This is odd," he muttered.

Daisyflower ignored him and instead pointed her tail in the direction of some tall mountains north of him.

"See those mountains?" she asked.

Tigerstripe nodded.

"Keep heading in that direction, and you should end up in your meadow."

"Really?"

The she-cat nodded.

"Really really?"

Daisyflower laughed. "Really, really. But don't think it will be so easy."

Tigerstripe groaned. "Hasn't the journey been hard enough?"

"There is much more in store," she purred.

"Wait...what?" Tigerstripe asked. But soon all began to fade from him, and he awoke back underneath the plant, his heart pounding.

Tigerstripe grinned, excited he was closer than he thought, but the thought of whatever was lurking in the future frightened him and made him wonder if the reunion would be as special as he hoped.

Chapter 40

As soon as Tigerstripe awoke the next morning, he began his journey toward the mountains that Daisyflower had pointed out to him the day before. His heart filled with excitement as he thought of entering into that familiar meadow again where he would hopefully meet Jetfur.

Despite his excitement, he also had doubts. What if Jetfur's sister had been lying? What if he wouldn't find Jetfur when he arrived? What if it had all been a big hoax?

He tried to keep these thoughts out of his mind though, hoping that Daisyflower's message had been proof that good things would be coming.

As the sun rose over the hills, Tigerstripe headed toward the mountains, on his search for fresh prey of any sort. As he walked along the dirt path and through rising green plants, he heard a faint squeak and turned, noticing a mouse scurrying nearby.

Tigerstripe crouched down and slowly approached it, leaping quickly. The mouse was dead in a matter of moments, and Tigerstripe quickly wolfed down his breakfast, wanting to get to the meadow as soon as possible.

He walked at a fast pace, though not so fast that he wore himself out. All he could think about was seeing Jetfur again, having someone to talk to again. He wondered what he'd do when he found her. Would they set out for his home again? Would he confess his true feelings for her? Would they...become mates? Tigerstripe decided just to focus on finding Jetfur first.

The day carried on, and while the mountains grew closer, Tigerstripe wondered if the forest would ever end and become replaced by the grassy meadow. The bright blue skies that had looked over him in the morning had begun to be replaced by gray clouds and a slight wind.

Tigerstripe shrugged this off as a green-leaf storm and continued on his way, keeping his eyes peeled for any sign of Jetfur. He knew the day was growing shorter and shorter, and he desperately wanted to reach the meadow before the sky got dark.

The gray clouds continued to move on, and soon, a light rain began to fall. Tigerstripe didn't allow the weather to hold him back though. He found that the earth was becoming more flat, and the trees were becoming less scarce. The meadow couldn't be too far now.

His heart pounding, he broke out into a sprint, drops of water pelting his coat. A boom of thunder echoed across the sky, and the rain picked it up. It reminded him of the storm that he and Jetfur had been separated in.

Suddenly, the trees gave way up ahead, and Tigerstripe could see the grass of the meadow shaking in the wind. He raced out from the forest, past all the trees, and found himself in the same meadow he had lost Jetfur many moons before.

"JETFUR!" he yowled, glancing around. The rain and wind picked up, a flash of lightning streaked across the sky. Tigerstripe saw no sign of the black she-cat.

I should've known it was too good to be true, he thought. *And now I'm trapped in this storm.*

He hadn't planned to give up yet though. He stumbled through the tall grass, ignoring his wet fur and muddy paws. He kept his ears pricked and wide open, but he doubted any living creature would be out in the meadow during this storm.

The storm seemed to only progress, and Tigerstripe wondered how much longer he'd be able to stay in the meadow. Perhaps it'd be better to head back into the trees and wait until the storm passed over. But he felt that he needed to be here at this moment.

"JETFUR!" he called desperately.

He looked a little longer, called her name a few more times, but he

could neither see nor hear any cat. He turned around, about to head back, when he heard a faint sound.

"Tigerstripe!"

Tigerstripe spun around, wondering where the sound had come from.

"JETFUR?! IS THAT YOU?!" he called.

"Tigerstripe!" came the shout, a bit closer this time.

The tom turned and noticed a bundle of black fur rushing toward him.

"JETFUR!" he shrieked in excitement. He began running to her, the rain and thunder pounding overhead. It seemed this storm was even worse than the one they had been separated in, but he would not leave her side this time.

"Tigerstripe! Tigerstripe!" Jetfur called, rushing toward him. Tigerstripe watched as she approached. She looked fatigued and exhausted. Her fur was soaking wet, and he could clearly see healing wounds from her fight and fall during the battle.

Tigerstripe approached her, and suddenly, the two were facing each other. Tigerstripe pressed his head against hers and let out a sigh.

"I finally found you," he breathed.

"I'm so glad you're not dead," Jetfur murmured.

He looked up and smiled, falling deeper in love with her gleaming green eyes. Oh, he couldn't wait to get out of here and go to his birthplace with her. For so many moons he had searched, and now, she was right in front of him.

"We should get out of this rain," he decided. "But we should stick together this time."

Jetfur chuckled. "Agreed."

As he was about to turn around, he watched Jetfur's eyes widen, and he glanced at her, concerned.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"WATCH OUT!" Jetfur shrieked, knocking him aside.

Tigerstripe watched in awe as a large cobra zipped past him. It had apparently tried to lunge at him, and if Jetfur hadn't moved him aside, it would've sunk its fangs into his throat.

The cobra turned and slithered near them, hissing angrily.

"It's from my dream," Jetfur whimpered.

"You had those dreams too?" Tigerstripe asked.

But this was no time for conversation. The cobra lunged again. Tigerstripe moved aside and sunk his claws into its neck. The snake let out an angry hiss and lunged for Jetfur this time. The she-cat was faster though, and she too clawed at it.

"Don't let it bite you!" Tigerstripe shouted, remembering the dream he had where the cobra had enclosed Jetfur in its teeth.

"I have an idea!" Jetfur called as they dodged the snake.

"What?" Tigerstripe called.

"I'll distract. You lunge."

Tigerstripe nodded and understood. The she-cat riskily provoked the snake and drew it closer to her. The cobra then seemed to become more fixated on Jetfur than Tigerstripe and soon seemed to be unaware of Tigerstripe's presence.

Tigerstripe slowly approached the snake from behind and waited for Jetfur's signal. The snake grew closer and closer to the black she-cat when suddenly she shouted, "NOW!"

Tigerstripe leapt for its hooded head and plunged its head into the ground, biting the snake's neck. The snake slithered and swarmed,

let out a deafening hiss, but it was too late. Tigerstripe held it down with its claws until the snake finally ceased moving. He moved away slowly, breathing in relief.

"It's dead," he told Jetfur, out of breath.

Jetfur nodded, and suddenly, the rain became lighter, the thunder and lightning ceased, and the wind began pushing away the gray storm clouds to reveal blue skies and a shining sun.

Tigerstripe padded over to Jetfur. "That was exciting," he said.

Jetfur laughed and licked his cheek.

"It's good to see you again," she purred.

"Let's get out of here," Tigerstripe suggested. They padded away, leaving the dead cobra, the storm, and all those poor memories behind.

Chapter 41

Soaked and exhausted, Tigerstripe and Jetfur found their way into the woods up ahead and quickly found a bunch of large trees they could sleep under. Tigerstripe curled up alongside Jetfur, thrilled to have her next to him again.

He watched as tiny drops of water from the storm dripped down the leaves of the trees, and the noise slowly lulled him to sleep.

When Tigerstripe next awoke, it was morning, and the sun's rays were just beginning to shine over the forest. He turned to his side to wake Jetfur then gasped to find her gone.

"Not again!" he shouted furiously.

He quickly got up from his sleeping spot and sniffed the air, beginning to pace around.

"Jetfur! Jetfur!" he called, quickening his pace.

The she-cat ran into him, holding two squirrels.

"By StarClan, Tigerstripe! What's the big idea?" she asked, retrieving the squirrels.

"Don't do that!" Tigerstripe shouted. "I thought you were gone again."

Jetfur chuckled slightly. "I was just getting us some breakfast. I think we have a lot to catch up on."

"You bet," Tigerstripe replied.

They both took a comfortable position on the forest floor and began biting into their squirrels. Tigerstripe hadn't realized how hungry he was, and he ate his quickly. Jetfur watched him devour his meal

and giggled at the sight.

"Sorry I'm not the best eater," he said.

Jetfur laughed. "I'm a bit hungry too."

"This feels so unreal," Tigerstripe pointed out. "It's been moons..."

Jetfur sighed. "I know..."

"What happened in that storm? Where did you go?" he asked.

"It's all a blur," Jetfur recalled. "I tried looking for you, but I couldn't see or hear you. I think I managed to get to the woods before I blacked out, and when I woke again, I couldn't see you anywhere."

"We must've gone in opposite directions," Tigerstripe guessed. "I found Snakepelt."

"I know of that," Jetfur said. "She seemed very unhappy with you."

"We made up," Tigerstripe promised. "I misinterpreted a prophecy that StarClan gave me. She wasn't the cat I should look out for. But she's on her way home now."

"Home? What happened?" Jetfur questioned.

Tigerstripe briefly explained Snakepelt's loss of memory and the appearance of her sister. He included his meetup with Korosu and Krait as well.

"Oh, dear! Well, I'm glad she's better. And what's this about my sister? Swampstar told me she was dead," Jetfur pointed out.

"Apparently not. And I met your mother too."

"Oh, I saw her in the forest too with Snakepelt. That was before..."

"Before what?" Tigerstripe asked.

"Swampstar and his gang found me not much later and forced me to live in SwampClan. That's why I was fighting in that battle. It was dreadful, Tigerstripe. It reminded me of MoonClan," she explained.

Tigerstripe frowned. "I'm sorry that happened to you. I never really came to any clans besides Snakepelt's. I met a lot of interesting animals though."

"Like?"

Tigerstripe went on to describe his encounter with Rain and the RiverClan cats and the wolves. Jetfur listened the whole time, her eyes widening with each new encounter.

"You should know everyone in the forest by now!" she exclaimed.

Tigerstripe laughed. "I sure did meet a lot of different animals. But it was all worth it to find you."

He watched Jetfur turn away and blush slightly. Was now a good time to admit his feelings? Did she feel the same? Or perhaps it was too early.

"It's really nice to see you again," Jetfur admitted.

"Yeah. You too," Tigerstripe responded. "It's not like I've been searching for moons."

"I'm glad we're together again. Things got tough once we got separated. I've never been that good at living on my own," she confessed.

"I thought I could be a rogue too, but I was so lonely every time I was on my own."

"So what now?" Jetfur asked. The bones of the squirrels had been wiped clean, and it seemed they were approaching the subject that had to be addressed.

"I--well, we can continue traveling to my birthplace," Tigerstripe suggested, though he wanted to speak of something else to her.

Jetfur seemed disappointed by this. "Oh, yes. I guess that's what we were doing before. I guess I was so focused on finding you."

"We don't have to travel there," Tigerstripe interrupted. "We can go

somewhere different."

"No, no," Jetfur said, standing up. "That's fine. That's what we wanted."

Tigerstripe could still detect the disappointment in her voice.

"Do you not want to travel with me anymore?" he asked quietly.

"What?" Jetfur said, spinning around. "Of course not! We've searched moons for each other. Why would we quit traveling? I...just thought it'd be different, that's all."

"Different how?"

"I-I don't know," she said. There was an awkward pause before any of them spoke again.

"We should probably get going before it gets too hot," Jetfur suggested. "My fur soaks up heat like crazy."

"I figured," Tigerstripe replied. He stood up and joined her, though he still felt odd inside and felt like more needed to be said.

"Jetfur, I--"

The she-cat stopped walking and spun around to face him, her eyes more full with hope.

"Yes?" she asked.

"I...um...when you were gone," he began.

"Go on," she urged.

"Um...well, I had a lot of time to think about you and us and...I may have some feelings for you," he admitted.

Jetfur glanced at him, confused. "Like?"

"I-I love you," he admitted. "I mean, I wouldn't have gone on this journey to find you if I hadn't. And all I could think about was us getting back together and maybe starting a new life together. I--it's

stupid, maybe. I don't know."

Jetfur laughed and approached him. She then nuzzled him gently.

"I love you, too," she whispered quietly.

Tigerstripe's eyes widened. "You-you do?!"

"You're one of the few cats who has treated me like I'm a decent cat," she told him. "All my life I've been bossed around and terrified of others, but you make me feel happy. You make me feel complete."

"Jetfur, will you...be my mate?" he asked.

Jetfur purred and nodded.

Tigerstripe nuzzled her once more. "Oh, you've made me the happiest tom alive!" he exclaimed. "I've dreamed about this for moons and now it's coming true. Let's go back to my birthplace. We can make a little camp of our own. Maybe kits will run around there one day."

"Now don't get too ahead of yourself," she teased. "But I like that idea very much. How about we be on our way?"

"Let's do it," he purred.

Together they padded away, looking forward to their new life together.

Chapter 42

Tigerstripe awoke to find Jetfur gently licking his cheek. He opened his eyes and watched her gazing over him.

"Morning," he muttered lazily.

She laughed. "Morning."

Tigerstripe lazily rose to his feet, letting out a groan. "Ugh, why'd you have to wake me so early?"

"We've got places to be," Jetfur explained. "I really want to see your birthplace."

"You seem more excited than me," Tigerstripe noticed.

"I think I'm tired of walking everywhere too. Being a rogue isn't the best thing ever," she admitted.

Tigerstripe smiled and nodded. His stomach let out a rumble, interrupting their conversation.

"How about we get some breakfast first though?" he suggested.

Jetfur nodded, and they set off through the woods, looking for whatever piece of prey wandered their way. Already it was beginning to get hot, and Tigerstripe hoped there would be enough shade on the journey to keep them from stopping often to rest.

As they walked, a rabbit suddenly leapt by. Before Tigerstripe could react, Jetfur leapt after it, and after some rustling in the bushes, she stood up with the dead rabbit in her jaws.

"Nice job," Tigerstripe told her, surprised. He had never known Jetfur to be the best hunter or fighter ever.

"I had to learn a few things on my own," Jetfur explained, dropping the rabbit at his feet. "Let's eat."

Together, the two sat and shared their squirrel, sharing some more stories from their journey while also expressing their excitement to settle down for once.

"Did you ever hear anything else about the other MoonClan members?" Jetfur asked.

Tigerstripe shook his head. "I haven't seen a single MoonClan cat since I left. Have you?"

Jetfur shook her head. "I don't mind not seeing them. They weren't the kindest."

Tigerstripe nodded. "Agreed."

"It would've been nice to see my sister though," Jetfur sighed.

"She seemed nice," Tigerstripe told her. "At least you know she's still alive, despite what Swampstar told you."

Jetfur nodded. There was a pause, and she picked some more at her rabbit. "What about your family? Do you ever think of them?"

Tigerstripe shrugged. "I mean, most of them are dead and probably running about in the Dark Forest."

"But your siblings," Jetfur suggested. "I mean, at least you got to grow up with them."

Again, Tigerstripe shrugged. "Hazelnose and Chesnuttail ran off when we were kits. And Leopardtail died in the battle. I mean, Chesnuttail died in battle too, and I haven't seen Hazelnose since. We weren't the best functioning family ever. I much prefer to hang out with you. To be honest, some of the cats and animals I traveled with I regard more as family than my own kin."

Jetfur nodded. "I see what you mean. But we're together now. That's what matters."

Tigerstripe nodded.

After breakfast, they continued on their way again. Tigerstripe was

beginning to recognize the forest and seemed to have a better idea of where they were going. He didn't want to admit it, but when he and Jetfur had first set off, he hadn't had the slightest clue in which direction his birthplace was.

"It's this way," Tigerstripe said, leading Jetfur to the right and into thicker bundles of trees.

"I'm surprised you remember it," Jetfur said. "Weren't you just a kit when you left?"

Tigerstripe nodded. "I'm surprised I remember, too. But the scent is familiar, and the surroundings are too."

"How far do you think we are?" Jetfur asked.

They'd been traveling half a moon so far (it had taken Tigerstripe a little bit to get on track). He suspected they were a quarter to a half of a moon to where he had been born, though he wished it come sooner.

He hoped also the old dens were still intact. His mother and father had formed a small camp when Moonstar had first begun MoonClan though he was unsure the camp still survived.

If not, he and Jetfur could always rebuild. It wasn't like they needed to create a whole camp. Just a den or two.

"We'll be there soon," Tigerstripe told Jetfur.

Jetfur smiled. "I can't wait!"

"We can relax all day," Tigerstripe fantasized. "No mean cats will tell us what to do. There'll be no battle training or skimpy meals. It'll be so nice."

Jetfur nodded. "It'll be nice to finally have a home for once."

Tigerstripe smiled, glad to be back with Jetfur again. After such a long journey, he couldn't wait to relax. He wouldn't be surprised if he slept an entire moon upon their arrival to the spot.

The day carried on. The sun got hotter though the trees seemed to provide enough shade. Still, he and Jetfur had to stop a few times to get a drink of water. His thick-furred coat and Jetfur's sleek black pelt couldn't take all the heat.

They made great distance over the course of the day, so much so that Tigerstripe suspected his legs would ache the next day. Finally, the sun appeared to be going down.

"How about we find something to eat and then look for a place to rest?" Tigerstripe suggested.

Jetfur nodded. She, too, appeared exhausted.

They managed to catch two mice and ate them laying out on the forest floor. In the distance, Tigerstripe noticed a small cave, and he led Jetfur to it, hoping to spend the night there.

They crept inside and sniffed around, though it appeared to be empty. Tigerstripe and Jetfur could detect no scent, and no movement echoed from inside. Still, they kept near to the mouth of the cave in case anything did decide to come crawling out.

As the orange sky was replaced by a dark one with shining stars, Tigerstripe curled up and smiled warmly as Jetfur laid beside him. She rested her head against his pelt and let out a relaxing breath. Tigerstripe smiled and gently licked the top of her head. Then, he rested his head down on his paws.

"I love you," he breathed.

He turned, but it appeared Jetfur had already fallen asleep. Grinning, he placed his head down once more and shut his eyes, hoping that the journey would reach its end sometime soon.

Chapter 43

The early morning chirping of birds awoke Tigerstripe one morning. His eyes slowly fluttered open, revealing the forest's grand scenery. Jetfur still slept soundly beside him, and he watched as he chest slowly fluttered up and down.

Tigerstripe smiled as he watched her and glanced ahead at the path ahead of them. They were getting closer to his home now. Each day he became more familiar with his surroundings. He knew it couldn't be long now.

Tigerstripe couldn't wait to finally settle down either. He'd been traveling so long, and while it was nice to have Jetfur traveling with him again, he couldn't wait to just relax in a place they could call home.

And maybe we could have kits someday, he thought.

All in all, he and Jetfur had been getting along well on their journey, and he was glad to have her back again. He hadn't realized how much he missed her.

Tigerstripe turned and lightly shoved Jetfur until her eyes opened. She smiled warmly at Tigerstripe and let out a large yawn.

"Is it morning already?" she asked tiredly.

"Unfortunately," Tigerstripe replied. "But not too many more days now."

"Good," Jetfur purred. "I'm pooped."

"Me too," he agreed.

Both Tigerstripe and Jetfur rose to their feet and stretched their legs a few moments. Soreness spread through Tigerstripe's body from previous days' travel though he did his best to ignore it. He wanted to get to his birthplace now, not save a day for rest.

"I suppose we should get breakfast then," Jetfur suggested.

Tigerstripe nodded, and they set off together in search of a meal.

It was already hot despite it still being early morning. Green-leaf seemed to bring more and more warmth each day, but it also brought a lot more prey, which was good for traveling conditions.

He and Jetfur padded around the forest with keen ears and eyes. Tigerstripe's mouth watered as he imagined eating a juicy rabbit or a scrumptious mouse. Then, a sudden rustle of movement caught his attention.

Tigerstripe turned but noticed nothing there.

Jetfur shrugged. "Guess it was just a lizard or something."

Tigerstripe nodded and they continued on their way. Finally, he spotted the white fluffy tail of a rabbit up a hill ahead. He quietly tapped Jetfur and pointed to the meal.

Jetfur licked her lips and nodded.

Together, they slowly crept toward the rabbit. Before Tigerstripe could leap, however, Jetfur had already leapt into the air. He watched in amazement as she quickly stabbed the rabbit with her needle-like claws, killing it quickly.

"Wow! Great catch!" Tigerstripe exclaimed.

"Thanks," Jetfur replied. She dropped the rabbit next to him, and they sat underneath the comfy shade of a nearby pine tree, eating their breakfast.

"I can't wait to be not so hungry all the time," Tigerstripe told Jetfur with a mouth full of food.

Jetfur laughed. "Yes. It'll be nice not to have to travel so far."

"Plus, no clan means no duties. We can eat whatever we want, whenever we want, and do whatever we want. It'll be great," Tigerstripe said, envisioning the scene now.

Jetfur nodded. "It'll be nice to have some freedom."

The two continued eating their rabbit until nearly all the meat had been picked off the bones. Tigerstripe grinned, now full and ready to take on the day.

"That was a good rabbit," Jetfur said.

Tigerstripe nodded. "Ready to head out?"

Jetfur nodded.

Just as he said that, another rustle came from the bushes. He turned, but once again, he saw nothing.

Jetfur looked past him and frowned. "I don't like the sound of that."

"Maybe it's just more prey," Tigerstripe suggested. "There's a lot of prey wandering around in green-leaf."

"I...don't think it's that," Jetfur said. She stood up and cautiously approached where the noise had come from.

Suddenly, Tigerstripe was hit with a bunch of unknown scents, and he knew they weren't alone. This realization hit him as Jetfur inched closer and closer to the bush. His heart seized, and he shouted, "Jetfur, look out!"

A large tom leapt out of the bushes and pinned her down, hissing at her. More cats leapt out from all around and surrounded the two.

"Get off her!" Tigerstripe shouted, about to lunge for the tom when a she-cat pinned him to the floor.

"What are you doing?! Leave us alone!" Jetfur hissed.

"Hazelstar said they'd be fighters," the tom spoke up. "Keep close to them," he told the others.

"Hazelwhat?!" Tigerstripe shrieked. "Who are you and what's going on?" He struggled underneath the she-cat's grasp, but she had muscles made of iron.

A ginger she-cat walked past the two. "We were ordered by Hazelstar to bring you to MoonClan."

"You mean Hazelnose? My sister?" Tigerstripe asked.

The she-cat pinning him down slashed him across the face. "Her name is Hazelstar and you will refer to her that way!"

"But MoonClan is gone!" Jetfur argued. "We lost the battle!"

"MoonClan has returned with an even bigger army this time and a new leader," the tom explained. "They intend to get what they want."

"Nonsense! We're not coming with you! We left MoonClan and we're not returning!" Tigerstripe spat.

"Oh, but you are," the she-cat holding him down said. "Hazelstar said if you didn't comply then we would take you as prisoners."

"My sister can rot in the Dark Forest!" Tigerstripe yowled, squirming beneath them. "We're not going!"

The she-cat was becoming more angry with him, and a quiet mew silenced Tigerstripe. Jetfur glanced at him, her eyes widened in fear.

"Just go with them," she whispered quietly.

He didn't want to go down without a fight, but he knew a fight would be useless. He and Jetfur were incredibly outnumbered, and these cats were clearly skilled in fighting. It'd be a suicide battle.

Tigerstripe sighed and finally loosened up.

"Ready to comply?" the tom asked.

"Fine," Tigerstripe grunted. "Let's go see my sister."

As soon as he and Jetfur were let up, they were immediately surrounded by cats to ensure they did not run off. Furious and heartbroken he and Jetfur's travels were for nothing, they silently

marched to MoonClan where Tigerstripe expected nothing more than pain and torture.

Chapter 44

For several days Tigerstripe and Jetfur were forced at their own will to march with the MoonClan cats toward MoonClan's new camp. Tigerstripe had fought slightly at first, but the strong cats were too much for him, and he knew it was no use.

Jetfur had been very compliant with the cats despite Tigerstripe's wishes. He knew it wasn't her fault. She had been in situations before, and apparently following instructions seemed to work best, but this was the first time Tigerstripe had encountered a situation like this. He didn't want to comply. He wanted freedom.

By the ninth or tenth sunrise, Tigerstripe's feet hurt from all the walking. Bruises and healing scratches covered his pelt. Jetfur had fewer bruises and scratches, but Tigerstripe could tell she was in pain with each passing step.

As the sun began to sink below the hills, one of the cats leading the others stopped at a hillside, glancing down at the horizon below.

"Stop," he ordered the cats.

Tigerstripe sighed in relief, glad his legs could have a rest.

"We'll camp here for the night," the ginger tom leading the cats explained. "Tomorrow, we should reach MoonClan."

Tigerstripe let out a sigh of relief. Never was he so glad to actually reach MoonClan. His feet hurt, and he longed for an actual den and nest. He wasn't sure he'd be treated like royalty upon his return though judging on how he had been treated by these cats.

Several cats sat up to stand guard while others began finding spots to sleep. Tigerstripe began to pad over to Jetfur when a gray she-cat stopped him.

"Not so fast. You'll sleep over there," she hissed, pointing to a nearby rock.

Tigerstripe unsheathed his claws in anger. "You've taken me hostage and driven me toward exhaustion. The least you can do is let me sleep by my mate!"

The she-cat bared her teeth and unsheathed her claws in response. "Is that a challenge?"

Tigerstripe let out a growl.

"Enough!" the ginger tom shouted. "Let him sleep next to the she-cat if he wants. We have plenty of cats on guard."

"But--" the she-cat began to argue.

"Go," he said.

The she-cat padded away, and Tigerstripe, thrilled with himself, padded over to where Jetfur was beginning to lay down. He curled up beside her and sat in silence for a few moments, watching the sun sink behind the hills.

Cats began to quiet down, and soon, many were asleep.

Tigerstripe could feel Jetfur's rapid breaths next to him, and he placed his tail on her to calm her.

"Are you okay?" he whispered, knowing the other cats were watching them intensely.

"I'm scared," she replied.

"Why don't you fight?" he asked quietly.

"It won't work. You know it won't."

"But you haven't tried," he argued.

"Tigerstripe, fighting doesn't always--"

"Hey, go to sleep over there!" a black tom hissed. "How do we know

you aren't planning to escape?"

Tigerstripe rolled his eyes and turned back to Jetfur, but her head was already resting on her paws, and her eyes were shut. He let out a sigh and rested his head down beside hers, letting out a deep sigh. He could only hope Jetfur would build up courage later on.

"UP!" came a loud shout from beside Tigerstripe. He glanced up, noticing the ginger tom was waking all the cats. He turned and watched Jetfur stir beside him. He helped her up to her feet until he was immediately pulled away by some cats and isolated from her again.

Tigerstripe glanced at her longingly, but Jetfur only sighed. There was nothing they could do. They were forced to travel separately for fear that they would plan to escape. But Tigerstripe longed to be near her after being away so long.

As some cats pulled her away, he unsheathed his claws, but upon seeing her widened eyes and shaking head, he sheathed them and unwillingly went off with the cats.

Despite Tigerstripe's guess they were heading down the hill, they actually began to head higher up. Tigerstripe let out a groan. He had been given a little mouse to eat, and now he was forced to tread up this high hill.

His legs burned with each advancing step, and when he glanced over at Jetfur, he noticed she appeared to be in pain too. Nonetheless, they continued to climb.

"Where exactly is this camp?" Tigerstripe asked after what felt like an eternity of climbing.

"You'll see soon enough," a white she-cat said beside him.

Tigerstripe groaned and continued on his way. Once the sun was positioned in the middle of the sky, Tigerstripe noticed the other cats slowing down, as if they were preparing for something.

We must be here, he thought excitedly, glad to stop climbing the hill.

"Bring the prisoners forward!" the ginger tom ordered.

Tigerstripe let out gasps of surprise as cats pushed him forward, a few using their claws to speed him up. He let out a growl and fell to the floor beside Jetfur as cats pushed them.

"Get up!" the tom ordered.

Tigerstripe slowly rose to his feet and yowled as more cats pushed him from behind. There were tall bushes ahead of him, and he guessed the camp must be inside.

Two cats grabbed ahold of him and pushed him forward. Tigerstripe suddenly feared everything being held inside the camp, and he let out cries of anguish, squirming in their grip.

"You can't escape! There's nothing you can do!" the cats growled at him.

Tigerstripe turned, noticing Jetfur squirming too. It appeared they'd both lost it. They didn't want to go through with this anymore. He wanted to escape now.

Despite his intentions though, the cats dragged him forward and flung him onto dirt. When Tigerstripe opened his eyes, he noticed cats padding around, all their eyes focused on him.

And sitting directly in front of him was a brown tabby she-cat, snacking on a squirrel. As soon as the she-cat's eyes fell on Tigerstripe, she let out a pleasant smile.

"BROTHER!" she exclaimed.

Tigerstripe's eyes narrowed on his sister, Hazelstar. She appeared to be stronger than when he had last seen her. Her eyes shined with energy, and her whole appearance seemed to be a bit more malicious than the last battle he'd seen her at.

"Sister," he growled. He squirmed more within the grip of the cats, wanting to escape now more than ever. Hazelstar wasn't here for small talk. He could see that she would kill if needed.

"WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?!" he suddenly shouted, unsure why she had decided to continue Moonstar's plan. He had been more devoted than her, and even he had changed for good. But her case was so odd. Why would a cat who had fled MoonClan's walls as a kit long to return and take on an evil nature?

"I had thought you were a true MoonClan cat," Hazelstar whimpered. "But I was wrong. You're nothing but a softy now."

Tigerstripe's muscles tensed, and he let out a growl.

"She's messing with you, Tigerstripe," Jetfur told him. Tigerstripe turned, nearly forgetting Jetfur was there.

"Oh, who's this?" Hazelstar asked. "Is it not the kit-like she-cat who left MoonClan running with my little brother."

"I'm not little!" Tigerstripe argued. And it was true. He was far larger than Hazelstar. In fact, he was the largest out of all his siblings. His muscles were much more defined, his chest was more broad, and his claws were even more sharp.

Suddenly, Hazelstar began to touch Jetfur's small face with her tail.

"Leave her alone!" Tigerstripe shouted.

"Oh, I didn't know she was special to you," Hazelstar admitted.

"Don't egg her on, Tigerstripe," Jetfur argued. Suddenly, Jetfur let out a yowl as Hazelstar brought a claw down her cheek.

Tigerstripe gasped, his worst fears coming true. He couldn't let Hazelstar hurt his only happiness left in the world.

"STOP IT!" Tigerstripe hissed.

"Throw them into the captive den with the others. And to you, my brother," Hazelstar purred.

Tigerstripe looked up at Hazelstar, his eyes widened with fear. Hazelstar was even more vicious than he had imagined.

"I trust you will fight for MoonClan."

Tigerstripe glanced at his sister right in the eyes.

"Never," he spat.

"Wrong answer," she growled. Suddenly, her paw came over his head, and upon feeling a hard collision, the world faded into darkness. The last thing Tigerstripe heard was Jetfur wailing in alarm.

Chapter 45

When Tigerstripe awoke, he found Jetfur leaning over his head, breathing out a sigh of relief.

"Oh, thank StarClan! You're all right!" she exclaimed.

Tigerstripe let out a moan, pain instantly rushing to his head. Jetfur licked his fur while Tigerstripe slowly sat up, his eyes adjusting to the new environment.

"My head," he grumbled. He knew it was not severe injury, but it was still sore.

"Be careful now," Jetfur warned him. "When Hazelstar knocked you out, I thought...I..."

"I'm okay," Tigerstripe assured her.

His eyes had fully adjusted now, and he suddenly realized they weren't alone. He was in a rather large den with several other cats. Other prisoners, he assumed.

"These are all FoxClan cats," Jetfur whispered. "Hazelstar's keeping them hostage too."

Tigerstripe glanced around, his eyes at once falling on his brother, Chesnuttail.

"Chesnuttail, is that you?" he asked the dusty brown tom. His brother had fled MoonClan with Hazelstar as a kit, and Tigerstripe had sworn his brother had died in the first battle of MoonClan.

Chesnuttail's eyes lit up. "Oh, Tigerstripe, you're awake."

"I-I thought you died...in battle," he said.

"It's a long story," was all Chesnuttail replied.

"Is this the captive den?" Tigerstripe asked.

The black she-cat beside Chesnuttail nodded.

"Hazelstar captured us not too long before you. We're being trained by MoonClan cats right now for battle."

"She's forcing all of you to fight?!" Tigerstripe exclaimed.

All the cats around him dipped their head in confirmation.

Tigerstripe let out a low growl and unsheathed his claws. "When I get my claws on her..."

"Don't," Jetfur snapped. "You know very well that Hazelstar is more powerful than you at the moment. You don't know what she can do."

"Jetfur is right," Chesnuttail agreed. "Hazelstar is more vicious than ever. We have to follow instruction for now."

"And let her just boss cats around? What's the point of that?"

"We weren't a tough MoonClan warrior like you," Chesnuttail pointed out. "And like it or not, you're not respected anymore."

Tigerstripe sighed and sat back down.

"Chesnuttail is right. We have to be patient," Jetfur told him.

"It's defeat, that's what it is."

"We'll work something out," she promised.

"Sure," Tigerstripe muttered.

Suddenly, their conversation was interrupted by a ginger tom sticking his head into the den.

"Rabbitfur, Deerheart, Hazelstar wants you," he said.

"They were exiled from their clan," Jetfur whispered as the two toms left. "That's what the others were saying."

"Then why were they hostages?" Tigerstripe asked.

"Hazelstar wanted to make sure they could be trusted before she moved them in with the other warriors."

"MOONCLAN! I REQUIRE YOUR ATTENTION!" came a yowl from outside. Tigerstripe immediately recognized it as Hazelstar's.

"What's she up to now?" he asked.

"She's making Rabbitfur and Deerheart full warriors," Chesnuttail explained. "And I'm guessing you'll be coming out soon."

Tigerstripe let out a growl and sat down near the entrance of the den, watching what was going on. He watched as Rabbitfur and Deerheart were escorted to the rock that Hazelstar stood on and padded up beside her.

"As many of you know, we took in two NightClan exiles a few sunrises ago. After testing them, they have proven themselves loyal to MoonClan. Now, I will appoint them full MoonClan members!" Hazelstar exclaimed.

"Lucky them," Tigerstripe grumbled.

He listened as cats cheered and Hazelstar continued on with making them swear oaths of loyalty. He was about to pad away from the entrance when the same ginger tom peeked his head back in. Tigerstripe had not recognized him before but now he suddenly recognized the tom as Fire, who had been a young kit at the time of the MoonClan battle.

"Tigerstripe, Jetfur, you're wanted," he said.

"No," Tigerstripe stated.

"Tigerstripe," Jetfur whispered, walking outside the den.

The guards standing outside the den seized the tom and knocked him forward while more guards stood by his side.

"No!" Tigerstripe shouted angrily.

"I require Tigerstripe and Jetfur now," Hazelstar said as Rabbitfur and Deerheart padded down from the rock.

Tigerstripe squirmed in the grip of the guards and shouted, but it was no use. They were too strong. He was forced up the rock with Jetfur to stand by his insane sister.

"You're insane, sister!" Tigerstripe spat.

Hazelstar laughed at this. "I'm insane, brother? I left this very camp at six moons while you basked in its glory. And now when you have a chance to reclaim your warriorship, you turn it down? I am being nothing but generous, dear brother."

This time it was Jetfur who responded. "Oh, hush!" she spat.

Tigerstripe watched in fear as Hazelstar turned her gaze to his mate.

"I must say, I didn't expect you to bring this puny she-cat back, brother. She's much too small. We all know she was a coward in battle."

"Leave her alone!" Tigerstripe hissed in response.

"Oh, very well, my fun is over," she said. "But still, you two will fight for MoonClan in battle."

Tigerstripe knew he could pledge his loyalty now, become a full warrior, escape the hostage den, and live worry-free. But looking at Jetfur, he knew this couldn't be. He had no desire to be a MoonClan warrior again. His time free from MoonClan had changed him, making him favor StarClan over the Dark Forest. As for Hazelstar, she had done the opposite.

"Never," Tigerstripe stated loudly.

"Then the powers of Moonstar and the Dark Forest will come upon you," Hazelstar told him.

Tigerstripe rolled his eyes. As if this was meant to scare him.

"Then let them."

Ignoring his comment, he watched as Hazelstar turned to the crowd of MoonClan members.

"Many of you may remember your fellow clanmate, Tigerstripe, correct?"

Tigerstripe glanced into the crowd, surprised to recognize a fair share of cats. He had hoped many had died or perhaps had been too far to return. But these cats nodded their heads, their eyes intently fixed on him.

"A great warrior who was sure to be loyal to MoonClan forever. Oh, what a great plot twist this is. He has returned with his so called 'mate', Jetfur, whom I'm sure many of you remember. Now, they will be captives still, of course, unless they perhaps have a change of mind."

"This is ridiculous," Tigerstripe groaned.

"I'm giving you a chance here, brother."

"No," he repeated.

"Very well. There will be a slight change in arrangements. Bone, could you please step forward."

Tigerstripe froze, watching as a large, muscular white tom stepped forward. Bone had been the deputy of MoonClan when he was a warrior there. In fact, the tom had trained him as an apprentice. He was stern and strong and slightly frightened Tigerstripe.

"Bone, you were Tigerstripe's former mentor, correct?"

"Yes, Hazelstar. I trained him many moons ago," the white tom explained in his deep voice that Tigerstripe remembered so vividly.

"Then you shall reteach him and Jetfur as well."

"But I am already training Chesnuttail and Cloudfoot," Bone argued.

"Not any longer. From now on, you shall train Tigerstripe and Jetfur. Go, brother. Touch noses to your mentor like the good ol'

days," she joked, pushing Tigerstripe forward. Tigerstripe stumbled, falling in front of Bone. The tom laughed and Tigerstripe growled and looked back at his sister. How dare she humiliate him in front of his former clanmates.

"Touch noses, then," Hazelstar repeated.

Tigerstripe stepped forward to touch noses with his mentor, only to receive a slash down his right cheek.

"Welcome back to training, Tiger*paw*," Bone sneered.

"Deerheart, Rabbitfur!" Hazelstar snapped.

The two focused their attention on her.

"You two will take over Chesnuttail and Cloudfoot's training. Don't let them manipulate you. I trust both of you."

"I shall teach them well, Hazelstar," Rabbitfur purred.

Tigerstripe stood, blood dripping down his cheek, watching the situation unfold in front of him. What had he gotten himself into?

"StarClan will destroy you!" Jetfur spat. Tigerstripe grinned, glad to see her fighting back.

"StarClan is nothing to me anymore," Hazelstar growled. Tigerstripe was suddenly being pushed by Bone toward the woods to train. He no longer fought but instead padded with him. Still, he turned back to glance at Hazelstar as he left.

As he slowly padded into the woods with Jetfur, he let out a gasp as Hazelstar spun around to face him one last time. He wasn't sure if he had imagined it or not, but her eyes had flashed red, like his mother's used to.

"Your eyes," he whispered.

Hazelstar seemed taken aback by his comment and glanced into a puddle, confused. Shuddering, Tigerstripe turned back around and padded into the woods next to Jetfur, ready for a most likely

painful training session.

Chapter 46

It had been a few sunrises since Tigerstripe and Jetfur's arrival into MoonClan now. Shortly after their "ceremony," Tigerstripe and Jetfur had been led into the woods where Bone trained them harshly. Each wrong move or failure to listen resulted in a strike and Bone made no hesitation in calling Tigerstripe "Tigerpaw" whenever he felt like it.

Both Tigerstripe and Jetfur had returned from training with scratches and bruises covering their body while Hazelstar snickered in the corner. Tigerstripe was beginning to hate her more and more each day.

But the days continued on, and Tigerstripe and Jetfur grew more exhausted and weary. New wounds replaced the old, and Tigerstripe felt as if his limbs would be forever sore. The other captives seemed to feel the same, and each feared the day they would be forced to fight in battle.

At least Tigerstripe and Jetfur had some company in the captive den, though the conversation was never that cheerful.

Tigerstripe himself had thought of many escape plans, though none of them would work once he thought it out. Hazelstar had too many cats in MoonClan, and he knew he'd be injured or even killed if he managed to escape.

He wasn't sure what he'd do when the battle came. He wouldn't try to fight the others, of course, but what would Hazelstar do? Would she force him to fight or just kill him right there? And what about Jetfur? What would happen to her? It seemed his dreams of settling down with her in a nice den by his birthplace seemed less and less real.

One night, both Tigerstripe and Jetfur sat in their nests, exhausted from another day of training. Bone had given Tigerstripe a nasty clawmark down his leg, and Tigerstripe licked at it, the wound still stinging.

Tigerstripe's stomach grumbled though they had recently been fed scraps from the fresh-kill pile. He had given most of his food away anyway since there were young kits in the captive den that needed food more than him.

Tigerstripe turned toward Jetfur, who appeared to be asleep. He watched her move around a little though in an attempt to get comfortable and realized she couldn't sleep either. He licked her ear, trying to comfort his mate. Neither of them spoke.

Tigerstripe glanced up, noticing Chesnuttail and his mate, the black she-cat Hollybreeze, were fast asleep next to each other.

He finally had gotten to know some of the other cats too. There was a dark brown tabby tom, Treestep, who was the apparent son of Hazelstar. Tigerstripe had been shocked, not knowing his sister had a mate or kits. Apparently Treestep had been born after the battle and had come to FoxClan. He, too, was not like his mother in favoring evil.

Treestep's mate, Rosecloud, a calico she-cat, was curled up next to him, though she didn't appear to be asleep. She had three kits nestled by her side, moving around in discomfort.

Tigerstripe glanced at Treestep curled up next to his mate and noticed the long scratch down the tom's cheek. He frowned, knowing that these cats were most likely getting the same treatment as him in training.

"I wanna go home, Mommy," Brownkit, a brown she-cat, mewed.

Tigerstripe watched as Rosecloud licked her daughter's head. "Don't worry. We will," she promised before turning away and sighing.

Tigerstripe sighed. Rosecloud's kits were only five moons, but Hazelstar had already initiated them as apprentices. He himself had

begun training at three moons, but this was different. These kits had been forced at their own will to train. Tigerstripe had been eager.

Tigerstripe glanced down, realizing Jetfur was looking at him. Her green eyes flickered, and Tigerstripe smiled weakly.

"Hi," he said.

He licked Jetfur's cheek. "I'm so sorry Hazelstar got you involved in this. She's insane..."

Chesnuttail had begun to stir now, and he slowly sat up.

"My brother's right," he said, yawning. "Hazelstar *is* insane."

The others had awoken too, and Treestep let out a low growl. "We have to get out of here somehow," he said.

"No!" Hollybreeze hissed. "They'll kill Rosecloud's kits. We can't put them in danger."

"They have Screechshade as their mentor!" Rosecloud hissed. "They're already in horrible danger. I saved them from being attacked today." She turned, showing long claw streaks down her side.

Tigerstripe winced, not knowing the severity of the kits' situation.

"There's got to be a way out," Tigerstripe said.

He turned, noticing Jetfur was slowly falling asleep. Not wanting to wake her, he licked her once more and let her rest, knowing she was exhausted. He gently stroked her with his tail and spoke in a quieter manner.

"Well, Chesnuttail, how did you get out of MoonClan that first time as a kit with Hazelstar? When she was still good?"

Chesnuttail paused and thought.

"It was Blacktail, a SnowClan warrior who is long dead now. He

helped get us out. But Snowfeather, a kind MoonClan she-cat, helped up escape. I heard she was killed after," Chesnuttail explained. He paused a moment, then sighed. "Tigerstripe, we can't go against these cats. They'll kill us all. When the battle day comes, then we can fight."

They began to hear Hazelstar speaking to cats outside, and Tigerstripe decided it was best to keep quiet for now. He sighed and settled back down next to the sleeping Jetfur, resting his head next to hers.

Exhausted, he fell into a dreamless slumber.

Chapter 47

The next morning nearly appeared peaceful for Tigerstripe. He awoke to the sound of chirping birds and the faint traces of sunlight flickering into the den. He yawned, and for a moment, he believed he was alone with Jetfur in a den of their own. The reality that he was in MoonClan hit him only a few seconds later.

He turned and sighed, noticing Jetfur was sleeping peacefully. He smiled but worried for her. It would be another difficult day of training.

"GET UP, YOU CATS!" came a loud screech from outside the prisoner den.

Tigerstripe sighed, watching as the other cats began to stir. Though he regretted it, he lightly poked at Jetfur.

Jetfur awoke suddenly, startled.

"Oh," she mumbled, rising without even stretching or grooming herself.

The prisoners were led outside like normal into the center of the camp where Hazelstar and their mentors waited for them. Tigerstripe glanced sadly at the blue sky and the songbird chirping in the trees, wishing this was a more lighthearted scene.

Tigerstripe felt Jetfur stiffen beside her and shrink down.

"Are you okay?" he asked. He knew she was frightened in MoonClan. He was too. But she didn't normally act this cowardly.

"I...fine," she argued. "It's nothing," she said, straightening back up again. Tigerstripe frowned but glanced forward, waiting for Hazelstar to speak.

"I expect nothing but great practice today," Hazelstar announced. "If that means blood and sweat then so be it!"

He watched as some of the kits in front of her cowered in fear.

Bone started making his way toward the two while Hazelstar spoke to him.

"Go easy on them Bone," she said, laughing. Tigerstripe glared at her then turned his attention to the large tom.

Hazelstar began rambling to some cat in the back that Tigerstripe couldn't get a good view of. He ignored her and instead focused on his mentor, waiting to hear what unbearable pain they'd endure for the day.

Jetfur appeared to have stiffened again and stared blankly past Bone.

"Ready for pain?" Bone asked, unsheathing his claws.

Tigerstripe was feeling more annoyed than ever today, and he let out a low hiss.

"I'm not sure why they let you back in this clan anyway. You got rid of MoonClan and ran like a coward. And your pathetic son broke my sister's heart and ran off with another she-cat."

Bone growled quietly while Jetfur poked Tigerstripe, indicating him to stop.

"Tooth is dead now. I'm sure you haven't noticed him around here."

Tigerstripe rolled his eyes. "What will you be teaching us?"

"Whatever I feel like it," he purred.

Not sure what compelled him, Tigerstripe leapt at Bone and pinned him to the ground, digging his claws into the tom's shoulders. He watched as Jetfur backed away a little, not wanting to fight.

Turning away from her, Tigerstripe turned back to Bone and dug his claws into his shoulder. The tom let out a yowl of pain and threw Tigerstripe off.

"NO ONE ATTACKS ME!" he spat. "I knew you'd crack eventually."

Tigerstripe leapt over Bone before he could make another move. Bone, stupid and confused, looked around to see where Tigerstripe had gone. Tigerstripe let out a hiss, allowing Bone to find his position, and leapt at him.

"Very good," Bone snarled.

Tigerstripe turned and watched Jetfur, her eyes widened in horror. The other apprentices and mentors had left, and now, cats were beginning to watch this training session unfold in the center of camp.

Tigerstripe let out a hiss once more while Bone turned his attention to Jetfur.

"Enough practice for you, Tigerstripe. Jetfur, it's your turn."

Tigerstripe felt his heart quicken and watched as Jetfur stepped forward shakily. She looked scared to death.

Bone leapt at Jetfur and snarled fiercely. Jetfur let out a yelp and turned to run. The tom caught onto her though with his claws and pinned her down.

"STOP!" Tigerstripe hissed, suddenly fearing for Jetfur's life. He pushed Bone off of Jetfur.

"What? Afraid I'm going to kill her?" Bone teased.

"I-I HATE THIS CLAN!" Tigerstripe snarled.

Bone let out a sickening laugh. "Better not act too rebellious or Hazelstar will have your head. These training sessions are required, Tigerstripe, and you'll be doing them whether you like them or not," he said, thrashing his tail.

Jetfur stood up from the ground, blood dripping from her flank and shoulders. She backed away slightly and unsheathed her claws, apparently now ready to fight.

"No, Jetfur!" Tigerstripe shouted. "You can't fight him. I-I don't want to see you get hurt anymore."

"Same as I," Jetfur muttered. She turned to the tom and spoke to him loudly. "I plead you to contemplate on what you're doing. It isn't right. What's your motivation? Every life you scar, it reflects back at you. And when you die, what have you taken down with you? The pleasure of blood stained to your paws, homicide committed. Is that how you want to be remembered?"

Tigerstripe glanced up and noticed this speech had caught Hazelstar's attention.

Bone stood there, dumbfounded, not sure what to do. Hazelstar continued to watch though, and Bone slowly moved forward and hit her face with his large paw.

"NO CAT DARES TO INSULT ME!" he shouted, but Tigerstripe could see Bone had been altered by Jetfur's words. Jetfur wailed in pain as Bone slashed a claw down her shoulder. She then bared her teeth and sliced her claw down Bone's cheek.

Bone was furious now. Whatever he had been contemplating before had turned into pure rage. He slashed at Jetfur and pinned her down. Blood trickled down his cheek and spilled onto her. Tigerstripe stood to the side, not sure what to do. It was as if his legs were frozen.

"Any last words, Jetfur?" he asked, raising a claw.

Jetfur writhed under Bone's grip and spoke through gritted teeth. "Rot in the Dark Forest, you wretched feline of crow-food," she cursed, her voice echoing throughout the camp.

Suddenly fearing for her life, Tigerstripe leapt at Bone right as he was about to bring his claw down. He pushed the tom aside, freeing Jetfur from his grasp.

"Very good," Bone said, laughing.

Tigerstripe turned and growled, helping Jetfur up. He hated how manipulative Bone was in his training sessions. He had never

planned to kill Jetfur, but he had gotten Tigerstripe to fight despite his wish not to.

"Are you okay?" he asked Jetfur quietly.

Jetfur froze again and looked forward. "I'm...fine," she said.

"What's the matter?" Tigerstripe asked.

He turned to see what Jetfur was looking at and froze. Sitting directly in front of them next to Hazelstar was none other than Krait.

Chapter 48

Tigerstripe froze for a moment, not entirely sure what to do. Here was the she-cat who had thrown Jetfur off the cliff, whom he had left to Korosu. How had she escaped from Korosu? Where were her kits? Had Dusty taken them?

Krait eyed him but said nothing.

Why won't she acknowledge me? he thought.

He jumped at the sound of Hazelstar's voice, forgetting he was still in training.

"My brother is still strong, perfect for our clan. But as for Jetfur," Hazelstar said, her eyes falling on the small black she-cat. "Her words are stronger. Hyacinth, go fight Jetfur."

Hyacinth? Tigerstripe thought. But that couldn't be right. This was most definitely Krait standing in front of him.

Hyacinth let out a small groan as Jetfur rose to her feet once more. She appeared to just be regaining her balance when Hyacinth lunged at the unsuspecting Jetfur. Jetfur was easily knocked down, and Tigerstripe watched as the Siamese easily pinned her. Jetfur struggled in the she-cat's grasp but appeared to be trapped again.

Tigerstripe watched Hyacinth bend down, and for a second feared that she was planning to bite Jetfur, when he realized she was whispering something to her. He could not hear what it was and didn't have time to find out as Hyacinth gouged her claws into Jetfur's shoulders to keep her still. Tigerstripe could see the fear gleaming in Jetfur's eyes. She knew that this was Krait too. He could only imagine what it would be like to once again come into contact with the very cat who had thrown her off that cliff moons ago.

"NO, KRAIT! GET OFF HER!" Tigerstripe shouted at last, knocking

off Hyacinth, or Krait, or whoever she was.

Hazelstar let out a yowl of disappointment.

"STOP!" she yowled.

Both Tigerstripe and Hyacinth froze. Even Jetfur had remained lying on the floor.

"Krait? Who is this Krait?" Hazelstar asked, confused.

Tigerstripe pointed to Hazelstar. "Krait! That's Krait!" he shouted desperately.

Hazelstar laughed and shook her head. "No, that's Hyacinth."

Tigerstripe stood, glancing at his sister in confusion.

"You must've been lied to, Hazelstar," he told her. "That is Krait."

Hazelstar eyed her brother with suspicion then turned to Hyacinth.

"Well? Are you Krait? Or Hyacinth?" she asked.

Hyacinth sprung up from where Tigerstripe had knocked her over. Jetfur, meanwhile, scrambled to get up and skittered close to Tigerstripe. Her fur was fluffed up in bewilderment, and Tigerstripe could feel her rapid breaths against him.

Hyacinth, instead of answering, sat down and licked the back of her paw. Tigerstripe watched as she licked the blood from the crevices of her claws where she had pierced Jetfur's shoulders. Finally, she spoke.

"Honestly? Krait? That's simply such an odd name. I'm Hyacinth, and I have no idea who you're talking about. Silly kitty..." She paused and flipped her paw over, wetting it with her tongue. She then swiped it behind and around her ear. "You must be...confused." She flickered open her amber eyes and stared at Tigerstripe, laughing.

Tigerstripe felt his muscles tensed, knowing Krait was messing with

him.

"No, I'm not!" he shouted angrily, unsheathing his claws. "You're Krait! I know you are! You pushed Jetfur off that cliff!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Hyacinth retorted.

"How did you escape Krait? What did you do with the kits? Why won't you leave us alone? Well, I'll finish you here and now." He lurched forward, ready to strike, when Hazelstar let out a deafening screech.

"STOP!"

Tigerstripe, though he didn't want to, froze, for fear what his sister might do to him or Jetfur.

"Tigerstripe, Jetfur, your training session is over. Bone, please escort them back to their den. I have some more...lessons to do with my new members. Hyacinth, please follow me to my den," Hazelstar said calmly. Tigerstripe was surprised. He had been expecting some physical punishment as a result of his outlash.

"Come along then, *Tigerpaw,"* Bone sneered.

"Quit calling me that," Tigerstripe muttered.

Jetfur was quiet, though her eyes were still widened in fear. Tigerstripe unhappily padded alongside Bone.

"I was telling the truth to her, Bone," he said quietly. "That isn't Hyacinth. That is a dangerous she-cat named Krait."

Bone snickered. "Well, even if it is, we need tough cats in this clan. Not soft kitties like yourself."

Tigerstripe ignored his comment and continued to speak. "But wouldn't Hazelstar be concerned? Hyacinth could threaten her power!"

Bone stopped at the front of the den and rolled his eyes. "I would smack my claws into the side of your face, but I'm tired from our

training. Look, even if you were right, Hazelstar won't listen to you. You're a traitor. Your words mean nothing to her."

"But maybe you could tell her," Tigerstripe urged.

"Do you really want me to do that? If Hazelstar found out Hyacinth bugged you that much, she'd be making that cat mentor you. I'm doing you a favor," Bone said.

"That's enough, Tigerstripe," Jetfur whispered.

"Fine," Tigerstripe said angrily, stepping back into the den. He and Jetfur found their familiar spots in their nests and sat down, beginning to lick their wounds from training.

The other cats were arriving back too, tending to their wounds. He watched Treestep lick scratches on his body while his mate and kits slept, scratches covering their pelts as well.

Jetfur was still laying in her nest staring at the ground, completely silent.

Tigerstripe turned to her and gently pressed his tail to her side. "Are you okay?" he asked. "I know she got your shoulders good."

Jetfur nodded, but didn't look at Tigerstripe.

"Hey, c'mon. It's okay," he said.

"I...I'm fine," she said quietly. "But...I...that wasn't Hyacinth. It couldn't be. That was truly Krait. I saw the way she looked at me. She knew that she had pained me in the past. How could a strange cat have that look?"

"I don't know," Tigerstripe replied. "And I think she's Krait too despite what she says. Perhaps Korosu confused her. I don't know. But how could she find us?"

Tigerstripe noticed Jetfur was slowly drifting off to sleep. Guessing he should get some sleep as well, he laid his head down next to Jetfur's and slowly drifted off, frightened of what future days in MoonClan would be like.

Chapter 49

Several sunrises passed since Hyacinth's arrival. Fortunately, the she-cat had not strayed too close to them, but both Tigerstripe and Jetfur were still frightened by Hyacinth's arrival. Despite her ongoing explanation that she had never heard of Krait, Tigerstripe couldn't help but see Krait within her. Perhaps Korosu had tainted with her mind.

As the days passed, Tigerstripe knew the battle was growing closer. Training was becoming more intense, the rogues were more present around the camp, and Hazelstar seemed to be more stressed and grouchy now more than ever.

Tigerstripe was not sure what would even happen the day of the battle. He and Jetfur already decided they would not fight for MoonClan, but how would the others respond? He did not want to be killed by Hazelstar. All he wanted was to go off with Jetfur and live in peace.

"Up, you cats!" screeched one of the guards from outside the den.

Tigerstripe slowly opened his eyes and nudged the sleeping Jetfur to the side of him. They slowly rose to their feet with the other captives. Tigerstripe groaned as he did so, his muscles sore from all the training they'd done. It wasn't so much that Tigerstripe couldn't handle the training. It was his refusal to train at times that put him in so much pain.

As they walked out into the busy MoonClan camp, Tigerstripe could already spot Bone standing nearby, smiling maliciously.

"And are my apprentices ready to train today?" he asked.

Tigerstripe let out a low growl. "Of course."

Together they padded into the woods. Tigerstripe expected nothing less than another day of pain and anger.

"I'd like to see some more effort from both of you," Bone explained as he stopped in the clearing that they normally trained in. "We are getting very close to battle day, and I worry your skills will not be enough to make MoonClan proud."

"Why does it matter? We're just captives anyway? So what if we fight poorly?" Tigerstripe asked, annoyed.

"Because if you don't represent this clan well, you will very well lose your life once we return to camp to celebrate," Bone threatened.

"If, you mean," Tigerstripe replied.

"Pardon?"

"If you win the battle. As I recall, a mere apprentice killed Moonstar last time," Tigerstripe reminded him.

Bone got up right in front of Tigerstripe's face and growled.

"It is different this time. Hazelstar has many lives, our cats are stronger, and there is a larger number of them. It would take a miracle for the other clans to win," Bone growled, sinking his claws into Tigerstripe's paws. Tigerstripe let out a yowl in surprise and watched Bone grin as he sheathed them.

"How about we train?" Jetfur suggested.

Bone turned away from Tigerstripe. "Excellent idea," he said.

He first practiced on each of them, fighting as his usual tough and vicious self. Tigerstripe could handle him better than Jetfur as he had been used to Bone's harsh teachings when he was an apprentice himself. Still, Jetfur's inability to fight well worried him. What if he lost her for good this time?

"I decided to put a little twist on our training today," Bone explained, "I would like you two to fight each other."

"Each other?" Jetfur asked. "But why?"

"It will be a good exercise. I am sure that when you are in battle you will encounter cats who will remind you of friends and loved ones. Now fight each other, and show no mercy!" Bone instructed.

Tigerstripe glanced at Jetfur with worried eyes and shrugged. Jetfur stood with the same worried look and awkwardly approached him.

"What are you doing?! Lunge!" Bone hissed.

Jetfur lunged at Tigerstripe. He, of course, let her pin him, not sure what the point of this exercise was.

"Come on, Tigerstripe! I know you're stronger than her!" Bone shouted.

Tigerstripe pushed Jetfur off of him and clashed with her. Still, both kept their claws sheathed. He pinned her this time and felt Jetfur struggle under his grip.

"Why have none of you unsheathed your claws?! Do so!" Bone yowled.

"Sorry," Tigerstripe whispered as he unsheathed his claws. They only lightly pressed into Jetfur, but it still drew blood. Jetfur raked her claws lightly on Tigerstripe's underbelly, prompting him to get off.

"Come on! I want to see some blood!" Bone hissed.

"Why are you doing this?" Jetfur asked desperately.

Not sure what Bone would do to Jetfur, Tigerstripe knocked Jetfur on the side, throwing her to the ground.

"What? Tigerstripe!" she gasped in surprise as he pinned her once more.

"Ah, betrayal! I love it!" Bone purred.

"Just trust me," Tigerstripe whispered. "I don't want to see him hurt you."

Jetfur was quiet for a moment, then nodded. Tigerstripe raised his claw, as if he were about to strike her neck, when Bone laughed and called for him to halt.

"That will be all for today. Very good, Tigerstripe. I have no doubt you will do well in battle. We'll have to work on your training a bit more, Jetfur," Bone explained.

Relieved the training session was over, the two returned back to camp and were escorted back into the captive den where the others were mostly gathered too.

"I'm sorry that I drew some blood," Tigerstripe told Jetfur. "I was worried that if we didn't cooperate, he might injure you."

"It's fine, Tigerstripe. I understand why you did it," Jetfur assured him.

"Tough training day?" Chestnuttail asked.

"A bit. Bone made us fight each other," Tigerstripe explained.

Chesnuttail winced. "Ooh, I'm sorry about that. Can't be any worse than normal though, right?"

"I suppose so," Jetfur sighed.

There was a pause, and then Tigerstripe's brother spoke again.

"So why did you change? You were one of the fiercest MoonClan cats I knew, so loyal, so fierce. I never expected to see you in this den," Chesnuttail admitted.

"Well, I went off with Jetfur, and...it felt nice to not have any rules, to be free to lead my own life. And then I lost her and went on this great adventure and...perhaps I finally experienced love for the first time," Tigerstripe said, now staring into Jetfur's eyes.

She purred and rubbed against him.

Chesnuttail chuckled. "I guess we all change. I hadn't expected Hazelnose to ever turn into the power-hungry Hazelstar."

"I suppose," Tigerstripe replied.

"Better enjoy the small talk while you can," Treestep budded in. "I heard some MoonClan cats saying the battle is supposed to occur within the next few sunrises."

Jetfur gulped beside him.

Tigerstripe wrapped his tail around her in a protective manner.

"We'll be ready," he said.

Chapter 50

As the days went by and the training increased, Tigerstripe knew that battle would be upon them very shortly. Hazelstar spoke more about it as the days went on, and each day, he grew more scared.

He was not sure what would await him and Jetfur on the day of the battle. He wasn't going to fight for MoonClan, but would the MoonClan cats give him a choice? He feared for his and Jetfur's safety, especially with Hyacinth lurking around.

The she-cat had not approached them too much, but he often caught her staring at them. He was unsure what she'd do the day of the battle.

One morning, before the sun had even risen, Hazelstar let out a deafening screech from the center of the camp.

"GET UP AND GET OUT!" she hissed. "WE START BATTLE NOW!"

Tigerstripe groaned, and before he could even register what was happening, guards burst into the den and pushed him and the others up. He walked around groggily for a few moments until he was able to find Jetfur.

He turned to her and smiled weakly.

This could be our chance to escape, he thought.

"I won't fight," Jetfur whispered.

"Me either," Tigerstripe replied softly.

"Tigerstripe, if this really is the end, then...I love you, and I'm sorry we didn't get to spend more time together," Jetfur said.

"It's not. We'll come through. You'll see. I love you, too."

"Would you two lovebirds shut up?" one of the guards snapped. "We have a battle to fight!"

As the sun began to rise over the horizon, the MoonClan army reached a vast meadow where the battle would took place. Tigerstripe was suddenly reminded of the meadow he had lost Jetfur, and he hoped that this meadow would not allow him to lose her again.

As they approached closer, Tigerstripe noticed that Jetfur was lagging behind some. He turned around and watched as she hurried up to him.

"I need to tell you something," she whispered urgently.

"Well, better hurry," Tigerstripe said, already noticing the large army of SnowClan cats and their allies approaching.

"Hya--" Jetfur began, only to be cut off by Hazelstar's yowl.

"MOONCLAN, ATTACK!" she yowled at the top of her lungs.

Cats pushed them forward, and Tigerstripe and Jetfur found themselves pushed into battle. Cats immediately began mixing with each other and fighting viciously. Tigerstripe ducked down, attempting not to be seen.

"Oh, no you don't!" came a fierce growl. Tigerstripe spun around, noticing Bone. "Go kill some cats!" he sneered, shoving Tigerstripe forward with his paw.

Not a moment later, Bone found himself in battle, and Tigerstripe was on his own again. Fortunately, this was working well. The MoonClan cats were too distracted to notice he wasn't fighting.

Jetfur suddenly let out a screech beside Tigerstripe as a calico she-cat pinned her to the ground. Tigerstripe gasped and rushed to help. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Hyacinth, but he said nothing.

He watched as the calico striked a few blows to Jetfur's face, hissing furiously.

"No, stop!" Tigerstripe yowled, pushing the calico off. "We're on your side! We're against MoonClan!"

The calico she-cat seemed confused and suddenly found herself in combat with more MoonClan cats.

"What did you want to tell me?" Tigerstripe asked, savoring every free moment. It had been bothering him since the battle began.

"Come this way," Jetfur said. They pushed their way past cats and found their way toward the edge of the meadow. Tigerstripe glanced up, shocked to see Hazelstar merely sitting on a rock at the edge of the meadow watching the battle.

What a coward, he thought. *She's not even defending her clan.*

Being sure not to be spotted by his sister, he leapt into some bushes with Jetfur, and the two crouched down quietly, listening to the yowls of battle nearby.

"While Hyacinth was holding me down that one training day, she whispered something to me. She isn't Krait, but she's her sister. She told me that Krait had tried to join MoonClan and had a plan to break us out," Jetfur explained. "But then..."

Tigerstripe knew what she was referring to. Korosu and her evil plans.

Suddenly, a mass of cream fur leapt into the bush that Tigerstripe and Jetfur were hiding in. Tigerstripe let out a gasp as the cream she-cat pinned him down. He glanced up, staring at Hyacinth.

"Listen. After this war subsides, will Hazelstar still keep you captive?" she asked.

"No!" Tigerstripe growled. "Because MoonClan won't win this war!"

Hyacinth grinned and stepped away from Tigerstripe. "Good. Follow me."

"Wait. Why?" Tigerstripe asked.

Jetfur began to emerge from the bush though, and Tigerstripe was forced to follow despite his reluctance.

"I hope you don't mind me doing this then," Hyacinth purred.

Tigerstripe watched in surprise as she raced toward the rock Hazelstar sat on and shot herself at the leader.

Hazelstar let out a mrrowl of surprise and stumbled backwards.

"HYACINTH! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" she hissed.

Hyacinth edged rearward and positioned her haunches upwards in a hunters' crouch. "Heh, that's the same thing I should be asking you. Causing a whole war? You should be in big trouble, missy." She snickered and launched herself, barreling over Hazelstar and sinking her claws into the leader's shoulders and waist, locking the two and pummeling down a few foxlengths not much unlike a tumbleweed before Hyacinth managed to hold her down triumphantly.

Hazelstar fell over and yowled.

Hyacinth's paw lightly touched the underside of Hazelstar's chin and she forced the leader's head upwards. "Really, now, that's it? I can imagine your bewilderment. H'm, well, like I said-- I am able to do a few things, combat, agility, defense... The whole lot! Pity that you have more than one life, but I guess now you'll be able to experience the wonders of leadership privileges." With a hardy chuckle, she took her paw away and dug her fangs into the neck. She gave a squeeze and blood streamed down into a little puddle, before dropping her down with a thud as if she were freshkill.

Tigerstripe watched as Hazelstar collapsed, clearly dead. The MoonClan guards were suddenly upon Hyacinth and pushed her away. Hyacinth took off and retreated back to Tigerstripe and Jetfur before the cats could catch her.

Jetfur appeared shocked.

"Hyacinth, y-you killed her!" she spoke under her breath.

Hyacinth shrugged. "Meh, didn't put up too much of a fight. Don't worry. She'll be back. Then we can celebrate," she said wryly. "And don't call me that. Now that I've committed homicide, it's probably best I tell you my real name. It's Klara. And this wasn't my original plan. I've been trying to break you out of MoonClan for moons, but oh well."

Tigerstripe felt a sting of anger.

"Well, didn't try hard enough, did you?" he asked. He would've been thrilled to have escaped moons ago.

"Quit fighting. Let's get out of here while no one notices," Jetfur said.

Suddenly, a she-cat's yowl rang out from across the field.

"STOP YOUR FIGHTING!"

Chapter 51

Tigerstripe watched as the entire meadow fell silent, and the last blows were given.

"Shinypelt, what are you doing?!" a black and white she-cat wondered. She seemed agitated and worried.

"I understand the prophecy now, Mother," she replied. She then turned to a white and gray tom standing beside her.

"Shinypelt, no. You can't," he begged, taking a step forward.

What in StarClan's name is going on? Tigerstripe wondered. He didn't even understand why the battle had ceased due to one cat's yowl. He looked upward, seeing Hazelstar had regained her life and was now watching the situation unfold intently.

Suddenly, the sky seemed to cloud up, and the air grew colder. Tigerstripe let out a gasp as darkness swirled near where the she-cat, Shinypelt, stood. As the darkness faded, there stood Moonstar, Tigerstripe's mother, a Dark Forest spirit.

"It's Moonstar," Jetfur whispered, quivering. She obviously had not forgotten the original MoonClan leader's violent nature.

"You can't defeat us!" Moonstar spat, laughing maliciously.

"Oh, but I can," Shinypelt replied triumphantly.

A light suddenly began to glow from Shinypelt's fur. It grew brighter and brighter, and eventually Tigerstripe had to look away for its brightness hurt his eyes.

"What the?!" Moonstar gasped.

The light grew brighter, and through his shut eyes, Tigerstripe watched the light flash and heard a deafening yowl from Moonstar. When he opened his eyes again, nearly all the MoonClan cats had

vanished, aside from the prisoners and a few rogues.

"WE'VE WON!" Cloudstar, the leader of SnowClan, yowled.

Tigerstripe glanced up. His sister, all those MoonClan cats, had vanished in an instance.

"Do you think they're..." Jetfur began.

"I think so," Tigerstripe replied.

"Oh no!" a SnowClan tom yelled. Tigerstripe glanced forward, noticing the she-cat, Shinypelt, lay limp on the floor.

"NO!" the white and gray tom, who had spoken to Shinypelt earlier, cried out.

Tigerstripe dipped his head, grateful to the she-cat who had so bravely given her life to spare them from MoonClan's rule.

Suddenly, her body began to lift into the air. Cats glanced up in confusion as blue lights dazzled around the she-cat. Once again, Tigerstripe was forced to look away due to the brightness, and when he glanced forward again, he noticed the she-cat's dead body had been replaced with a tiny kitten with her same pelt colors of white and gold.

"Sh-Shinypelt?" the white and gray tom asked, inching forward toward the kit. He turned to his leader in confusion. "Is this my kit or Shinypelt?"

Cloudstar shrugged. "I do not have all the answers, but perhaps this kit is yours, Patchfur. What will you call her?"

The white and gray tom, now known as Patchfur, thought for a moment. "Lifekit," he said, "because she represents new life." And with that, he picked up the kit, and the armies began to disperse.

Jetfur stared, dumbfounded, while Klara laughed.

"So much for my glorious moment," she chuckled.

"Wow," Tigerstripe said, simply amazed. He had never witnessed StarClan's powers so much as that before. It was still hard to believe he was free again.

"Oh, there's probably a few things I should clear up," Klara said, her chuckles ending. "Krait, my sister--I know you hate her--however, your wish has been granted. She is, indeed, dead. I know you're probably not interested, but it was her dying wish that I tell you that."

Tigerstripe, moons ago, would've been thrilled to hear this, but now his heart only sunk. Krait had made bad decisions, yes, but he had never wished to see her dead or longed to hear she had perished. They had been friends for many moons, and despite her betrayal, he ached for Dusty and her kits.

"I'm off now," Klara said. "Sorry I couldn't be of much help."

"You have helped plenty," Jetfur assured her.

Klara nodded and headed off, leaving both Tigerstripe and Jetfur behind. Tigerstripe walked alongside the meadow a bit, searching for any trace of the MoonClan cats, but he found none.

"Hey, you okay?" Jetfur asked.

"Fine. It's just...odd that they could all be vanquished like that," Tigerstripe said. "And I don't think I'll ever see them again. I'm sure they're in the Dark Forest. I know I shouldn't miss them, but, Hazelstar was my sister, and I admired Bone when I was younger. It's an odd feeling, you know."

"I understand," Jetfur told him. "But now we're free, and we have our whole life ahead of us. So I'm asking you. What do you want to do now?"

"Let's head back to my birthplace, for real this time," Tigerstripe told her.

"And live the rest of our lives together?" she asked.

Tigerstripe nodded. "And live the rest of our lives together."

She grinned and nuzzled him. He smiled, and as they walked away from battle and into the woods, their tails intertwined. Tigerstripe grinned and padded forward, glad the journey was over, and glad to be with Jetfur again, now and forever.

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading *The Search for Jetfur.* It has truly been a journey writing this book, and I want to thank all of you who voted and left heartwarming comments. Your support encourages me to continue writing every day.

This was sad for me to write, as this is the last Warriors novel I will be publishing. I know many of you are saddened by this, but it is time to stop. I stopped role-playing about four years ago and have nearly captured in novel form every role-play I have lived out. Not to fret. I am now writing a Warriors short stories collection for the time being. So I'm technically not retiring from Warriors forever, I just won't be publishing any more full Warriors novels.

Besides thanking the fans, I must also thank the person who helped bring this story to life. Thank you to collie7225 on YouTube who role-played Jetfur and a great majority of the other characters in this book, such as Rain, Krait, Snakepelt, and so forth. She really helped create the story, and to her, I owe the most gratitude. Check out her channel here: https://www.youtube.com/user/collie7225

One last thank you to all the fans out there. I first started writing Warriors novels and publishing them on Wattpad in 2012. A lot has changed in that time, but you guys never stopped commenting and voting and showing your support. Thank you to all of those fans who have stuck with me since *Icestar and Blossom.* I am truly grateful to have people like you supporting me. I am very saddened that this is my last Warriors book, but I hope you'll continue to support my future works.

Thank you once again, and I hope you enjoyed the novel!

~Maeve